This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

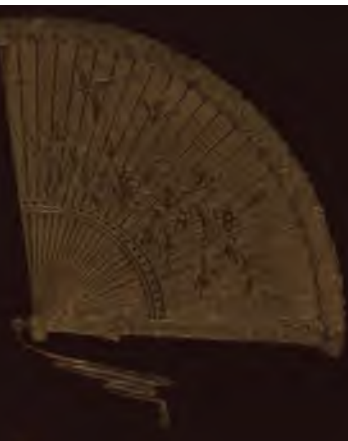
+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

As in a Looking Glass



By F. C. Philips

Illustrated by G. Du Maurier.

c.p. Lettre + 12 p. de Geo du Maurier.

1889

(Durand Ruel)

Saloon 1961

Wolf 5526

150

AS IN A LOOKING-GLASS.

FINIS CORONAT OPUS.

As in a Looking Glass.

By F. C. Philips.

Illustrated by G. du Maurier.

London:
WARD & DOWNEY.
1889.

RICHARD CLAY AND SONS, LIMITED,
LONDON AND BUNGAY.

TO

SARAH BERNHARDT

AND

FANNY BERNARD-BEERE

(THE REPRESENTATIVES OF LENA DESPARD IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND)

This Book is Dedicated

AS A TRIBUTE OF ESTEEM AND ADMIRATION BY THEIR

SINCERE FRIEND,

THE AUTHOR.

This Edition is limited to 1000 *copies.*

CONTENTS.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	ON THE WAR PATH	1
II.	FRESH CONQUESTS	10
III.	JACK	20
IV.	ALGY BALFOUR	33
V.	I DINE WITH CAPTAIN FORTINBRAS	40
VI.	AT DENSTON	45
VII.	THAT WICKED SIR THOMAS	55
VIII.	MISS VYSE EXTINGUISHED	64
IX.	LORD UDOLPHO	75
X.	SIR THOMAS AGAIN	87
XI.	EN VOYAGE	100
XII.	AT MONTE CARLO	114
XIII.	MY BIG FISH BITES	127
XIV.	I BREAK THE BANK	139
XV.	'TAINT FAIR, BUT I AM MADE TO PLAY	159
XVI.	LANDED	168
XVII.	I DECLINE AN IMPORTANT APPOINTMENT	184
XVIII.	THE LEECH AT WORK	197
XIX.	MY MARRIAGE APPEARS IMMINENT	209
XX.	EXIT JACK	222
XXI.	EN ROUTE	230
XXII.	BUDDING AFFECTION	240
XXIII.	PREPARATIONS FOR MY MARRIAGE	250
XXIV.	BALFOUR CASTLE AT LAST	261
XXV.	REAPPEARANCE OF MY EVIL GENIUS	276
XXVI.	PASSION-FLOWERS AND POPPIES	283

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

FINIS CORONAT OPUS ... ... *Frontispiece.*

"What an abominable day!" I said crossly, by way of pleasantly opening the conversation ... ... *To face p.* 16

When we have satisfactorily disposed of the more substantial dishes, we each light a cigarette, and Jack, leaning back with his legs crossed, asks me what are my plans. *To face p.* 40

"I am sure that there is something about Algy that I ought to know" ... *To face p.* 56

"Whoever would have dreamt of such luck as this?" cried the visitor. "I hadn't the least idea you were in Paris" ... ... *To face p.* 77

"No!" he cries, madly flinging his arms about my skirts. "No, you shall *not* go! No, you *shall* not leave me!" ... ... *To face p.* 98

"Lena," he says, "can you tell me what it is to love?" ... ... *To face p.* 133

"Permit me, then," he says, "that I present M. le Prince Volgareff, the Russian Ambassador to the Court of Westphalia—Mrs. Despard" ... ... *To face p.* 178

He waves a greeting with one hand, and removes his cigar from between his lips; but he does not make the slightest pretence of leaving the sofa ... *To face p.* 204

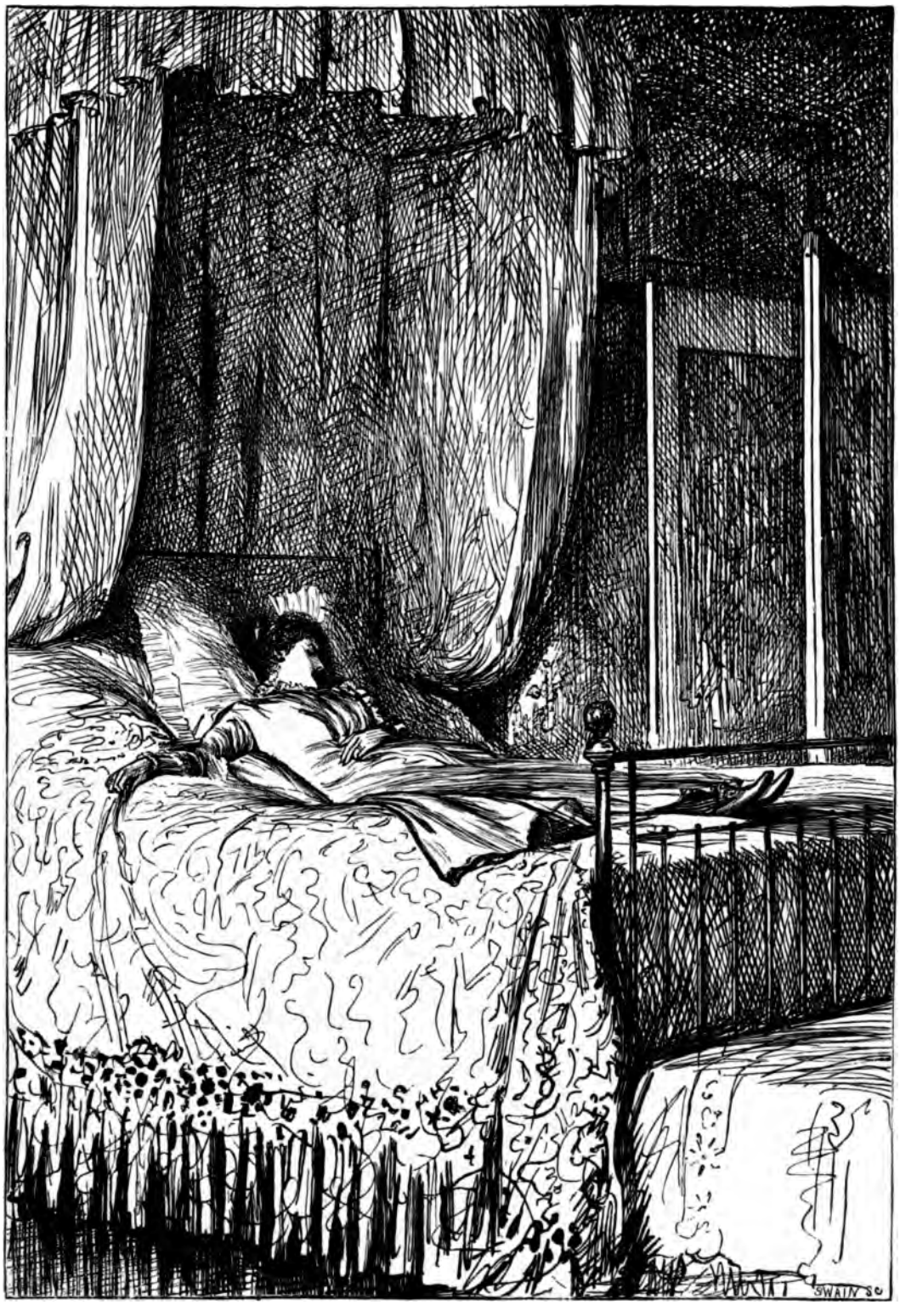
"I have advised him to leave here at once, and to avoid the terrible temptation of Monte Carlo" ... ... *To face p.* 227

He throws away his cigar, draws up a footstool, places himself at my feet, and begins to talk in a desultory way about all kinds of things ... ... *To face p.* 247

She advances to meet me very graciously. "I am glad," she says, "to welcome you here, my daughter" ... ... *To face p.* 274

"You fool," he said, "why did you not marry Miss Vyse? Ask your wife there how she and I planned the matter" ... ... *To face p.* 286

AS IN A LOOKING-GLASS.



FINIS CORONAT OPUS.

the fact that my presence at the feast was only in order that she might enjoy the latter's company more at her ease; but although I could see the Vicomte was more or less devoted to her, yet I came in for no small share of that gentleman's attention. I was dressed in a neat, becoming black dress, ablaze with jet, and with a fair sprinkling of diamonds; and disdaining the usual red rose in my hair, with which heroines of romance usually adorn themselves, I really think I looked rather nice. The dinner was slow, I must admit, the conversation being chiefly about the prospects of the Royalists in France, and the extortion of Homburg hotel-keepers, and these, to me uninteresting, topics I had to carry on single-handed with the G.'s, who, however, contradicted each other so repeatedly and so persistently that they saved me a great deal of trouble. After dinner, however, I was able to become better acquainted with Monsieur de Bois Crevé, Lady Damer and Lady Gage having retired to a sofa to converse about their respective village schools. The Belgian is a little *gommeux* dressed in the most irreproachable English clothes, and with a collar which appeared to afford him the greatest inconvenience whenever he wanted to turn his head, which he very often *did* to see if Lady Damer was looking on and approving of our conversation.

He spoke fairly good English, and after various preliminary platitudes he asked me if I bathed at Ostend, to which I replied in the negative, with the inward reflection that if only he saw me in the sea minus my hair and complexion, to say nothing of the shade about my eyes being entirely gone, he would scarcely have asked such a silly question. "I bathe in Paradise," he said.

Failing to catch the meaning of this remark, I inquired what he meant.

"They call the *bain des hommes* 'Paradis,' you know, but whether because no ladies are ever there, or on account of the absence of costume, I really don't know."

"But don't you think that ladies go to Paradise?" I inquired.

"I am sure *you* will," was his comforting reply; but seeing Lady Damer's eyes fixed upon us, I drew myself up and coldly asked him "Why?"

"Because '*les yeux gris vont au Paradis*,'" was his answer, with a look evidently intended to penetrate my very soul, but which in reality did not get much further than the steel gray eyes which were going to assure me so satisfactory a future.

"Have you known Lady Damer long?" I asked him.

"I met her last year in London; you know I am at the Belgian Legation. She is a great friend of yours?"

"I am very fond of her, but I don't see much of her."

"I, too, am very fond of her."

"You must not say that," I said, laughing. "She has a husband."

"And have you?" he asked with some eagerness.

"I have had two," I replied, evasively, keeping for a future occasion the fact of my separation from each of my spouses.

"And they are both dead?" he said interrogatively, and attempting to throw some pathos into his voice.

I longed to say, no, they are both alive and kicking, but with my usual adroitness I changed the conversation, as I deemed it unnecessary to gratify his curiosity. At this point Lady Damer evidently thought that I had had my share of the Vicomte, and came across to ask me to sing something.

"I know it's a shame to ask you so soon after dinner," she said, and might have added, and that's why I do ask you;—"but Sir Thomas is so fond of music, and so is Monsieur de Bois Crevé, that I am sure you won't mind giving us a treat."

"Do you sing any of Moore's melodies?" asked Lady Gage. I was afraid I didn't remember one.

"Do you know '*Ce que je suis sans toi*'?" asked the Belgian,

effusively, as he came up to me at the piano. "Is it a riddle or a song?" I replied, laughing; but Lady Damer immediately came up, saying—"All that I stipulate against is 'The Lost Chord,' or 'Let me dream again'; I do so much dislike an English ballad." With these conflicting requests I struck out a line for myself, and sang the *Habanera* from *Carmen*, and when I came to "Si je t'aime prends garde à toi," I looked the little Belgian full in the face, and was rewarded by a glare from Lady Damer of the most murderous description. When it was over there was a chorus of praise from every one but the hostess, who said—"It is a pretty thing, but the words are so ridiculous, though one must remember that they are supposed to be sung by a girl in a cigar manufactory."

"She must have been an odious woman, judging from the opera," said Lady Gage.

"Merimée made her a delightfully impulsive one!" said Bois Crevé.

"She may have been impulsive, but all her impulses were bad ones," replied Lady Gage, severely.

"For which she paid very dearly," I said, sadly.

"You mean with her life," said Lady Damer. "Well, I don't suppose that it was of much value to any one!"

It depressed me to hear my favourite Carmen so energetically run down; but, feeling that her moral character was quite indefensible, I wisely held my peace, and was glad when Bois Crevé changed the conversation by asking me if I sketched. I told him it was my favourite pastime.

"Vous avez tous les talents," he said, enthusiastically. "Will you come out sketching with me to-morrow?"

"Is Lady Damer to be of the party?" I asked, with as much *naïveté* as my thirty-three years' knocking about the world could produce.

"There is no party," he said, "but I can show you some pretty things to sketch if you will allow me to accompany you." But this I feel bound to decline. Then old Gage came up and asked me if I liked

shells. Of course I said "Yes." One must always say yes to this sort of question.

An expedition to search for them was then proposed by him for the next day, but this Lady Damer firmly put down, and I was rather disappointed, as the Gages have a fine place in Buckinghamshire, and I was looking forward to ingratiating myself with them with a view to a visit to their highly respectable ancestral halls.

What a perpetual struggle it is to get on! Women are always so against one, and those who require the greatest indulgence themselves are the first to put every obstacle in one's way to knowing people who could be of use in a moral rehabilitation. However, the discussion came to an end, and I felt my evening was not thrown away, for I made up my mind to "attach" Bois Crevé to myself, and to pay a visit sooner or later to the Gages. I came home, wrote in my diary, and closed my eyes with the comforting reflection that *ce que femme veut*—somebody —I have heard it quoted both ways—*veut.* Next week I shall be in London—dear, foggy, disreputable London, and then for my country visits *à la grâce de Dieu!*

CHAPTER II.

Fresh Conquests.

Ostend (still Ostend), September.

YES, I am still at Ostend! And so is Monsieur le Vicomte de Bois Crevé, and so is Lady Damer, and so is Sir Thomas Gage, fifth baronet, and so is Lady Gage.

And all owing to a caprice of good King Æolus. (I think it was Æolus.) His winds, which yesterday were all easterly and apparently squabbling *entre eux*, to-day are unanimously and harmoniously southerly. And it has been quite summer weather; at all events, Indian summer weather.

No! I will condescend to no subterfuge, now I am talking to my only confidant. I will sully these truthful pages with no lie, however white it may be.

The strict truth is that *I* am staying on in consequence of the pleasant change in the weather; *they* (the male worthies above mentioned) are still here in consequence of my continued presence in this favoured spot. The rest of the party (the female contingent or whatever you please to call them) are naturally at the heels of the partner of their joys, legitimate and illegitimate. And as you, dear Mrs. Diary (I have positively already taken a fancy to you, although this is only the third time I have had a chat with you), as you are to have *all* my secrets, I may as well at once tell you a *little* secret, a very little one, just to

begin with, and to accustom myself to the practice. *Il n'y a que le premier pas qui coûte;* so here goes!

I believe those women, both those women, are jealous of me. As if I had done anything to make them jealous. As if I had not every now and then made myself scarce, and actually kept out of their way. Can I help having a better voice and being more *chic* than Lady Damer? Can I help being younger and more amiable than Lady Gage? Can I help people coming up and disturbing me when I am sitting in a quiet corner looking over the *Illustrated London News?* and then, when I have a headache, can I help being absent from the table d'hôte? And when it gets better towards half-past nine and I make my appearance in the saloon, looking quite an invalid, with a pretty pale face, and a pretty pink tea-gown, can I help people being idiots and rushing at me with outrageous and unconcealed manifestations of joy and relief? Of course not! That is—that is, I am afraid I am falling into my old and most reprehensible habit of trying to deceive everybody, including myself. But I must not deceive you, my diary. Have I not vowed you my fullest confidence? "*On recule pour mieux sauter.*" I have effaced myself, now and then, to make myself wanted. Now and then when I have had the opportunity (which has not been often—but even a Lady Gage and a Lady Damer cannot be always on their guard) I have used the sweet sad smile and the far-off look from gray eyes with deadly effect upon the Baronet to the irritation of the Vicomte; and the same weapons upon the Vicomte to the obvious uneasiness and irritation of the Baronet.

Not now and then, but always (that is, almost always) I have, like some wounded dove, nestled under the portly wing of Lady Gage. I have murmured the most touching episode of my wrongs (I mean Wrongs —I always use the word as if it began with a capital W), that any woman could possibly invent, into her sympathetic ear. I have talked goody-goody to her; I have even entrusted her with my subscription to the

Church of England services, which some migratory clerical has been holding in the hotel *salon.*

And all the time I have seen Sir Thomas tramping up and down the terrace, furiously puffing at successive cigars, and evidently wondering when an opportunity will arrive for a *tête-à-tête.*

And all the time Bois Crevé has been reading the *Figaro* and *l'Indépendance Belge* upside down, with the determination of being first in the field when our discussion shall have ended, although his natural inclination is to the card-room, and his desire is to the cigarette.

And Lady Damer? Oh, Lady Damer! Ha! Ha! (It seems absurd to express laughter in writing, but I can't help it. I must place it on record that at this particular point I broke into a little fiendish cackle.) Ha! ha! I think Lady Damer has been sulking. At all events, she has become very thick with the Bassishaws lately—ex-Lord Mayors of London, you know. I suppose I ought to say "Ex-Lord Mayor;" but then, you see, he has a wife—and *such* a wife. Yes, Lady Damer has neglected us dreadfully lately. Doubtless she began by taking her "brave Belge" to task by "making him scenes;" and ended by finding that even a Belgian, like a worm, *will* turn. For yesterday morning, when I said to him what I have written above—"And Lady Damer?" he answered, "Oh, Lady Damer! *Flûte!*"

Now, what does "*Flûte*" mean, I should like to know? I am longing to get the account of this morning's triumph over, and pass on to the evening of the day in which I positively "led captivity captive" in the person of Sir Thomas and Bois Crevé.

There I am again, quoting Scripture. I hope it doesn't look too shocking; but if it does, recollect what doses of Lady Gage and the migratory clerical I have had lately.

I should dearly like to begin with to-day and finish with yesterday. But no, we must be methodical, we must be chronological, we must set down events as they happen. Well, then, about yesterday.

Yesterday the concho—(let me see; where's my Webster? Oh! yes, that's it)—the conchological expedition came off after all. And here I may remark, *par parenthèse*, that, although one's education may be neither better nor worse than anybody else's, a dictionary is a most useful adjunct to one's writing materials.

Yes, in spite of Lady Gage's and Lady Damer's opposition, we have been "to look for shells." And when I say "we" I mean the author of this veracious history, and Bois Crevé once again.

It was on this wise. I had satisfactorily discussed my *déjeuner* (I purposely abstain from saying "breakfast," which, to my mind, always suggests half-past eight in the morning, weak tea, and mildewy eggs and bacon). I had trifled with a *côtelette à la réforme*, spoken a word or two to half a bottle of Chateau Lafitte, and pecked at an *omelette aux fines herbes.*

I had just tested by experience how many sips it takes to drain a cup of black coffee when you flavour it with a dash of cognac, and in how many puffs it is possible to reduce one of Laferme's cigarettes to a small heap of ashes.

And I was leaning against the window, looking out at the black sky and foam-crested waves, and wondering whether I should be able to stand another day of Kursaal and Terrace—Terrace and Kursaal, when—when I had an idea!

"Félicie," I cried, "get me into my tweed costume. Bring up my Alpine boots, and fetch my mackintosh."

It was not long before I had doffed my black satin dressing-gown (trimmed with gold braid and real lace—a marvel. I should be no woman if I could refrain from a few details once in a way) and donned a tailor-made tweed suit, deer-stalker hat, and neat, very neat, high lace-up boots.

It was not long before, with mackintosh on arm (the same I used to wear aboard No. 2's yacht), a quaint basket in one hand, and a

cunning crutch stick in the other, I had sallied forth from the hotel towards the Kursaal.

It was not long before I had half opened the door of the reading-room attached to that luxurious establishment, and had presented to its admiring occupants a provoking, *piquante*, pretty face, just ready to nod *bonjour* and *à tantôt*.

Yes, why should I not put "pretty"?

I *was* pretty that morning, and I looked my best with a plain, high collar round a plump throat, and plain square cuffs over dogskin gloves. There is no phase of conceit more detestable than self-depreciation.

"Ah! Madame," cried the Vicomte, hurrying up from the end of the room, "at last, there you are; but this costume, that basket, that mackintosh!"

"Where, in the name of all that's wonderful," broke in Sir Thomas, in his gruff voice, "is the delicate Mrs. Despard about to go this rough morning?"

"I am going to look for little shells," I answered, "and when I have found them, I'm going to put them into a little cabinet with little drawers in it. And I'm going to be a con—a concho—a conchologist. There now!"

"What, alone?" expostulated Bois Crevé. "Madame would explore the desolate seashore unattended. I will never suffer it. Behold, I offer myself as escort! Will you have of me?"

"Oh, there is Lady Gage," I said, vouchsafing no answer to my interviewers. "I must go and say how-d'e-do to dear Lady Gage."

And I peacocked accordingly across the room to dear Lady Gage, who sat fuming and bridling at the big table, apparently engrossed with the *Morning Post*.

[N.B.—"To peacock."—Word invented on the spur of the moment

by myself, as accurately descriptive of the feminine walk now-a-days—*i. e.*, the result of a careful combination of very high heels and a good dress-improver.]

"I thought," growled Lady Gage, severely, after a limp shake hands, "that we had given up the shell expedition."

"Oh, yes, of course," I sighed meekly; "but I am going quite alone. I could not resist the temptation, although it is such dreadful weather; I am so devoted to con—to concho—to conchology, you know."

"It is quite out of the question to go out in such weather," she replied.

"Oh, I don't mind a little wind and rain," I said, cheerfully, "it hardens one."

"I don't require hardening," she said, and looked at me as much as to say: "and I am sure you don't."

"And I will accompany you," said dear old Sir Thomas, making a supreme effort for liberty.

"My dear Sir Thomas, you will do nothing of the sort," said his wife; "I don't wish to have you laid up with bronchitis and sore throat as you were all last winter. If Mrs. Despard is quixotic enough to brave such a day, there is no reason why you should."

Sir Thomas collapsed, beaten again in one of the numerous and ever-recurring encounters with his wife, in which, by reason of his senile imbecility, he was always bound to be defeated.

"Then I must go alone," I said, sadly, and my melancholy tones had the desired effect of producing Bois Crevé from his remote corner, and he would not hear of my taking a walk unaccompanied.

It was really too silly, all this fuss about nothing at all, and *malgré moi* I had to accept his offer. I didn't care to be the unintentional cause of a marital wrangle between the Gages—at least not in public—and I knew it would pique Lady Damer if I *accaparéd* her man; so feeling

that it would be war to the knife with her, and having a sudden fit of utter recklessness, I put on my sweetest smile and bade him accompany me.

"Good-bye, Lady Gage, I shall see you at dinner," I said, "and mind, dear Sir Thomas, you are very careful; a sudden chill or sitting in a draught in this cold weather might be very injurious to you. Now, mind you are careful."

Lady Gage looked as if she could have eaten me, and vouchsafed not a word. Her dear old husband, however, muttered an assurance that he would be careful, and bestowed a most despairing glance upon me as I left the room with Bois Crevé in triumph.

Once on the sea-shore, I was in a different mood; my high spirits suddenly evaporated, I felt like a bottle of soda-water half an hour after the cork has been drawn.

I had so thoroughly missed *my* point, and was furious with the little Belgian for having gained *his*. The moment I felt him trudging by my side perpetually being blown up against me by violent gusts of wind, I took a loathing to him, and thought what an idiot I had been to allow my temper to get the upper hand of my prudence. However, it would be too silly to think of going back then, so I determined to inflict half an hour's punishment upon myself by enduring his society for that time.

"What an abominable day!" I said, crossly, by way of pleasantly opening the conversation.

"No day could be abominable to me in which I had the pleasure of a walk with you," he replied, tenderly. "Won't you take my arm?"

"No, I won't," was my surly reply, "I don't wish to be taken for an *endimanchée* housemaid, out for a walk with her *promis*."

"But there is no one to see us," he argued.

"There are all the people looking out of the hotel windows, and precious donkeys they must think us for going out in such weather."

"What an abominable day!" I said crossly, by way of pleasantly opening the conversation.

"Would you like to turn back?" he said, evidently not appreciating my violent temper.

"No, we may as well go on. I am sure Lady Damer will be very angry with me."

"Why should she be?" he said, again flung against me with a tremendous bump by the heedless tempest.

"Because I have no right to be out alone with you."

"But that is no business of Lady Damer's."

"Don't you think so?"

"I am sure it is not. She is not my wife or my mother."

"Still, she will be annoyed, and it was very silly of you to be so persistent when you must have seen I didn't want you to come."

"Oh, Mrs. Despard, how can you be so cruel? Why did you not tell me in the hotel that you would rather go alone?"

"Because I didn't care to have a scene, and make an exhibition of myself before all those people. You have no tact."

[If there is one thing a foreigner prides himself upon, it is upon an unlimited possession of that most desirable article, and I could see the hot blood rush up to poor little Bois Crevé's cheeks when I openly accused him of his want of it.]

"I have never been told so before," he said, evidently much hurt, "but then, perhaps, it is because I have never cared for anyone as I have cared for you. I suppose that is why one forgets everything and everybody, and makes endless mistakes and blunders. Mrs. Despard, you cannot tell how miserable you make me, how devotedly, how passionately I adore you!"

"My dear Vicomte," I said, freezingly, "I know one thing, and that is, that it is perfectly impossible to be sentimental in this weather. To begin with, I can't hear half you say with the roar of the sea, and, secondly, I am far too wet and cold to think of anything so inappropriate as love. Let us retrace our steps."

And we did retrace our steps, and I endeavoured to keep him on conventional topics as far as I could, until we had nearly reached the hotel, and then he burst forth again.

"Might he come to my little salon as soon as we had both changed our wet things?"

"No!"

"Might he tip the waiter to let him sit next to me at the table d'hôte?"

"No!"

And finally with amazing effrontery, "Might he wait for me on the sands, and would I come to him after the Kursaal dance was over, about half-past eleven."

The "No!" to this request was far more vigorous and emphatic than either of the other two had been, and I sent him away cursing his fate and the *froideur* of English women in general, and my own self in particular.

The game really isn't worth the candle. It is true Lady Damer has been very rude to me at times since I have been here, and that I could thoroughly repay her by estranging from her this enterprising little *Flamand;* but I think, all things considered, it is more advisable for me to present the other cheek to be slapped, and to continue in my usual *rôle* of Humility. Lady Damer will be very useful to me in London, and I really can't afford to quarrel with her; moreover, as Bois Crevé is as perfectly indifferent to me as the paper on which I am writing, I make up my mind to lay aside all my little arts and seductions as far as he is concerned and go in heavily for sisterly affection with Lady Damer. With this virtuous resolution strongly imprinted on my mind, I rush upstairs and change my dress, and go forth in search of her ladyship, determined to regain her affection or friendship, or whatever she may call the feeling she once had for me. I am told she is in her salon, and I knock somewhat timidly, opening the door at the same time, saying—

"May I come in?"

She looks up from a French book she is reading, and appears to be anything but pleased at the sight of me.

"Oh, it is you," she says with a yawn, "I thought it was the waiter; I had ordered some tea."

This is not encouraging, but I persevere nevertheless.

CHAPTER III.

Jack.

THERE are certain periods in the life of those most expert in what—for want of a better term—I will call duplicity, when they cannot help feeling nervous and demoralized, and when, in fact, a sort of mental paralysis sets in. As a rule, I am not a sufferer in this way, and am certainly not in the habit of being put down by clamour, but on the present occasion, seeing as I do the cold, gray eye of Lady Damer fixed on me, and instinctively knowing that a fracas is about to take place, in which I shall probably get the worst of it, I must candidly admit that my sensations are most unpleasant.

Lady Damer resumes the conversation. "I am glad, however, that you have come," she says, "because it is necessary that we should have a few moments' conversation with as little delay as possible."

"Indeed!" say I, with as much affection of innocence as my shattered nerves will allow me to muster; "whatever do you mean, dear?"

"Simply this," she replies: "You will have to leave Ostend to-morrow, or else put up with the consequences."

"I fail to understand you, dear."

"You are growing very dense, I fear, Mrs. Despard," says Lady Damer, "but to save time, I will enlighten you"

"Pray do so," I say coldly; "really my nerves are not strong enough to bear these *coups de théâtre.*"

"Ever since I introduced you to him," pursues Lady Damer, "you have done your utmost to rob me of the affection of the only man in the world that I care a rap about; and you have pretty nearly succeeded, but not quite. Now I don't intend that you shall succeed. I know enough of your past life to gibbet you as high as Haman. I am perfectly acquainted with many little episodes that never came out when your interesting legal difficulties were discussed in the Divorce Court. Now I am quite ready to make a bargain with you. Your departure for my silence. As long as you don't cross my path, nor interfere with my plans, I shall in the future, as I have done in the past, keep my information to myself."

Feeling myself entirely at her mercy, and knowing, as I do perfectly well, that Lady Damer is in position to bite as well as bark, there is nothing left for me but to capitulate. This I do with as good grace as possible.

"You are entirely wrong," I say, "in your suspicions. They are most cruel and unfounded. Monsieur de Bois Crevé has never made love to me, nor should I have permitted him to do so even if he had attempted it; but if your mind is the least uneasy, I can speedily relieve you. I had already determined to go away to-morrow, and, indeed, had come in to tell you so."

"Then there is nothing more to be said," remarks Lady Damer, "except that, since we now understand each other, I have no wish to act in any way inimical to you, and I trust that we shall always remain friends."

"Thanks," I say, coldly; "good-night."

"Good-night," she replies, "and *bon voyage.*"

And it is in this undignified way that I am driven from Ostend.

I fear that it is not in a very Christian frame of spirit that I return

to my hotel. Having vented my annoyance upon the unfortunate Félicie, who, however, bears my little bursts of temper with the utmost imperturbability, I order her to get my boxes packed, and tell her that we are going to London to-morrow. I then send her to the chemist's to get a little chloral, being fully satisfied that I shall not sleep without it. My prophecy is fulfilled, for the horrid man refuses to supply that most delightful drug without a doctor's prescription, and I lay awake all night swearing vengeance on Lady Damer, and vowing to be even with her for the annoyance and humiliation she had caused me.

In the morning I am besieged with solicitations from Sir Thomas and Bois Crevé to remain a little longer. They have heard of my intention, and do their best to shake it, but without success. There is, however, an unmistakable look of satisfaction on Lady Gage's bovine countenance; and, as for the authoress of my discomfiture, she does not put in an appearance. Now that I am compelled to go, I should not be a woman if I did not madly desire to remain a little longer. But this, of course, cannot be, for I am not yet strong enough to defy Lady Damer, and dare her to do her worst.

I loathe the sea at all times (except when on board a really comfortably arranged yacht), and to-day it is very rough, and so the prospect is anything but inviting.

The Vicomte and Sir Thomas both insist on seeing the last of me, and the latter, for once, braves his wife's authority. At the moment of my departure, Lady Gage orders him to take her to see some friends of theirs who have just arrived at Ostend.

The little man refuses point-blank, and I scarcely know which of the twain is more astonished—Lady Gage at her lord and master's sudden rebellion, or Sir Thomas at his own temerity.

"I shall manage very well, dear Sir Thomas," I say. "Monsieur de Bois Crevé has kindly offered to see after everything."

"I never heard of such a thing, Mrs. Despard," he replies. "I

insist on seeing you off, and I only trust that we shall soon have the pleasure of renewing your charming acquaintance."

Lady Gage glares, and for a moment seems bereft of speech. But I offer no further objection, and so it is settled.

At last I am on board. The Vicomte speaks to the captain, who is very civil and attentive, and does everything in his power to palliate the horrors of that hateful crossing. The Belgian confides to me the fact that he intends to shorten his leave of absence, and return to England. "And you, cruel one, are the cause," he says.

"Pray don't talk nonsense," I reply. "I may as well tell you that I shall only be in London for a day or two."

"Where are you, then, going?" he asks.

"Heaven only knows!" I reply. "My plans are not yet settled."

"I will find you," he says, "if I have to search the furthermost end of the world."

"Thanks," I say; "but don't you think that, instead of distressing me with your foolish chatter, you might help Sir Thomas to look after my luggage?"

The tears mount to his eyes at this somewhat cruel snub. "You cannot mean to wound my feelings," he says. "I would die for you."

"I am sure I hope that you won't," I reply. "I don't wish to have anything so terrible on my conscience."

At this moment the signal is given for all who are not crossing to leave the boat.

"Adieu, mon Ange," says the Vicomte.

"God bless you, dearest Mrs. Despard," says Sir Thomas, and my two admirers scramble up the gangway.

The ropes are loosened, and I huddle into my cabin and await the martyrdom I always suffer on the hateful channel steamers.

* * * * * *

A tedious sea-voyage—landing at cold, rheumatic, respectable Dover

—and then—Victoria Station. What a chill strikes one's heart as the step from the railway carriage is taken!

Once more in the greatest city of the world—the metropolis dear to the snob and the gentleman, the paradise of the slaves of fashion, the denizens of the demi-monde, and the smug respectability of the shopkeeper.

A sigh of regret for naughty, frivolous Ostend, and then a feeling of stern determination to play my cards well in the far more serious campaign before me here.

There I was amusing myself with a few bagatelles—I was enjoying a well-earned holiday—but now, well—the stakes are high, and the chance of success gains not by delay; and if I fail there is scant mercy for me to expect.

At Ostend I was conscious of leaving two hearts despondent—two hearts triumphant. Need I say the former were masculine, the latter feminine? Poor Sir Thomas! When the stars looked down on him at 11 p.m. that night, I fancy they witnessed an unusually interesting episode in the history of his connubial happiness.

Poor Bois Crevé! Poor idiot!

Dearest Lady Damer, although for the moment you have defeated me, you had better bow to the inevitable! Isn't it time to think about a nunnery? Shall I kick down the last ladder I have made use of, or can it still be of any use to me? Will further friendship help or hinder me?

Do people here still believe in her? This I must find out without delay.

Félicie has brought me my letters and my chocolate, and a sense of homeliness comes over me for a moment.

Yet it gives way to the feeling which always recurs to me the instant I set foot in London, the feeling that I have lost my independence, that I must submit to a stronger will than my own.

Perhaps it is the knowledge that I must be more cautious in my behaviour, more quiet in my demeanour.

Perhaps it is—but no—why should I conceal from myself and you the real, the only reason? It is Jack.

Of course one of these letters is from him. It will tell me what I am to do, and where I am to go, whom I am to conciliate, whom to cajole, whom to entice. Ah, God! the term of slavery comes back—I mean how useful it is to have a man like Jack to help one.

What is the good of saying to myself that I will go on like this no longer; what use making up my mind to shake off the yoke and dissolve the partnership; to work independently, and follow my own schemes and obtain my own ends?

I have made these resolutions twenty times before—twenty times have I given in and gone back to the old slavery.

But at any rate I will insist that some alteration shall be made—at any rate I will. . . .

I will open Jack's letter.

"I shall be in to-morrow morning till twelve o'clock. You had better come about half-past ten. Much to tell you."

I will not go. If he wants to see me, let him come here.

But perhaps, after all, it would be more prudent to go to him.

* * * * * *

Now for my visit to Jack.

Punctually at a quarter past ten, therefore, this morning I emerged from my *bicoque* in Mayfair, and got into my pill-box of a brougham to be whisked off to Jack's chambers in the Albany.

Brougham and house are both part of my stock-in-trade—expensive but necessary.

I am dressed entirely in black, with a very dark veil, like a Catholic lady going to confession. An appropriate costume, in good sooth, for

is not Jack my father confessor? But it is certainly not from any respect for the confessional whither I am rattling that I am soberly clad, but rather from prudential motives

It is true nobody is in town, but I do not wish to run the risk of being recognized by any chance dragon of virtue as I knock at the door of a *roué's* chambers, even at ten a.m. It certainly is rather thoughtless of Jack to expose his partner to danger like this. I must remember to take him to task about it.

Here we are at last. Rat-a-tat! Tat!

Jack's valet is at the door in a moment. We are old acquaintances.

"Good morning, madam," he says, deferentially; "will you please walk up? The captain is expecting you."

This is a most invaluable servant. He has travelled all over the world. He can do everything, from varnishing a patent leather to sailing a boat—from shaving a chin to cleaning a breech-loader. But his forte, his *spécialité*, his chief recommendation in Jack's eyes, is that as a cool, unblushing, systematic liar he stands simply unrivalled, even in his own mendacious profession.

Whether he is blowing his master's trumpet at a fresh watering-place, or foiling the machinations of a justly indignant creditor, his colossal falsehoods are proof against any wile of the enemy, and able to cope with the horns of any dilemma.

When Jack is in a good temper he is wont to substitute for the gentle soul's patronymic of Norton names of a more playful fancy, such Baron Munchausen, Ananias, Prince Beelzebub, on which occasions Norton will smile deprecatingly, and bow a little, as though receiving a well-merited compliment. A very good valet is Norton.

"Excuse me, madam, for saying so," he says suavely, as he opens the outer door of the first-floor suite, "but I do rejoice to see that your voyage has done you so much good." Then with a gentle knock he throws open the inner door, announces me, and is gone.

"Well, Jack; here I am, you see," say I.

"Well, Lena; and how are you?" says Jack.

Captain Fortinbras, late of the 5th (Queen's Own Musketeers) Dragoons, occupies a spacious set of rooms, which are luxuriously but unostentatiously furnished. Everything is not only in the best form, but "looks like money." There are evidences of a refined artistic taste on all sides, as well as the usual appurtenances of a man-about-town's chambers. Any one calling here for the first time must of necessity be very favourably impressed. Here are obviously the *Penates* of a man of means.

All these, however, as well as the captain's faultless get up under all circumstances, his neat phaeton, his pretty park hack, his opera-stall, and, indeed, all his surroundings are nothing but a judicious investment of capital.

In other words, it is Jack's stock-in-trade. For Jack is a *Chevalier d'Industrie*, I grieve to say. The sole and only income that he has beyond the yearly hundreds (or thousands, according to his luck) which he gains by his wits, is £52 per annum. He does not talk much about this particular source of revenue. They *do* say (people will say nasty things, you know, sometimes) that it merely represents the sum of £1 a week left to him by his late lamented father, "in order that he may have no excuse for putting his hands into other people's pockets."

But that is a base and cruel calumny, I know. He may be very clever at cards and billiards, and he may be able occasionally to sell a horse to advantage; but as for doing anything *approaching* dishonesty—well, you had better suggest such a possibility in his presence! He would most certainly invite you to join him on a shooting expedition to Boulogne sands. And he shoots very straight, as some people know to their cost. As he rises from the sofa to greet me, I notice that whether or not my little trip has improved my looks, the interval does not seem to have done *him* much good. It is the same tall, soldierly form, the same

clean-cut, aristocratic face, with its fierce black moustache and pale blue eyes under heavy brows; but with this difference. Whereas, before my departure, his age might have been anything between thirty-five and forty-five (I never did exactly know his age), this morning he looks forty-five, and "flattered at that," as the Irishman says. There is an uneasy glitter in the eye that he takes such care to keep soft and benevolent; there is an unusual pale haggardness on the placid, bronzed features. There is a dejected stoop in the shoulders, and a dragging of the legs that ages him wonderfully.

The breakfast lies on the table in its silver covers untasted. On a *gueridon* by the sofa stands the spirit case, and two or three empty soda-water bottles are lying about on the floor.

These (to me who know Jack so thoroughly) are signs of great mental disturbance. He, who generally is so abstemious—who takes his morning meal as if his night had been spent in the slumbers of innocence—must indeed have had something serious to upset him lately.

"I'm very well indeed, thanks, *très cher*," I answer in acknowledgment of his greeting. "But I need not ask how you are. Very chippy, I'm afraid."

He passes his hand over his forehead, as though to chase away some evil recollection.

"Very chippy indeed, Mrs. Despard," he says, putting forward an armchair for me. "I scarcely thought when I wrote to you to call here this morning that you'd find me like this."

"Talking of that," I say, leaning back luxuriously, "and without suggesting for a moment that you ought to have been polite enough to spare me the trouble, how *could* you have been so rash as to bring me here when you know how all-important it is for me to respect *les convenances*—especially just now?"

"For God's sake, Lena," he growls irritably, "spare me your *minauderies* this morning, at all events. You know well enough that I never do anything without good cause."

"Like the rooks," I mutter, *sotto voce*, afraid of rousing his wrath, and yet wickedly enjoying the satisfaction of seeing my impassable partner for once where I have so often been—in the blues.

Jack pours himself out another brandy-and-soda, and then, with an unsteady hand, takes a deep draught of the foaming mixture. Then he heaves a deep sigh of relief and subsides on to the sofa. Then he selects a big cigar, and having brought it to a good glow, takes up his parable.

"Look here, Lena," he says at last. "I told you to come here this morning because, first, I had something to say to you on two or three points; secondly, I couldn't come round to you last night as I had important business here, nor this morning, as I expected to be called away from London on the same business at a moment's notice. Does that satisfy your ladyship?"

"Perfectly," I answer, coldly. I don't like the way in which Jack says, "I *told* you to come." Is he my master, pray, as well as my partner?

"Well," he continues, amid vicious puffs, "my important business was this: I have been very thick this last week or so with that young idiot, Lord Slumberton; and I've spent a lot of money over him in one way or another."

"Invested it, you mean," I interpose, satirically.

"And as he told me he meant to stay on here some time"—disdaining my little stab—"I never even alluded to the subject of cards, though he has been up in these rooms several times as tight as a drum. But yesterday afternoon he informed me that he was off to-day to St. Petersburg in pursuit of his beloved Catarina, who has had a sudden fit of home sickness."

"So you invited him to dinner last night, of course, you kind man?"—Another stab. I am still chafing under Jack's curb.

"So he came to dinner"—flashing an angry look at me, and stifling an oath—"and we went to the Hilarity together. After the

theatre we came back here for a broiled bone, and then we sat down to a quiet rubber of *écarté*. I lost at first pretty heavily——"

"Of course," I said, viciously.

"Will you hear me out?"—springing to his feet—"and then he—*he*, Lord Slumberton *himself* proposed to increase the stakes."

This time I laughed out loud.

"By God! Lena, I swear it. You *must* believe me. He proposed to play me twenty-one games at £50 the game, and £1000 the rub. Well, I agreed after some demur, and we were just playing the second game when in walks Charley Hicks with a friend whom he wished to introduce to me. Who should the man be of all men in the world but Algy Balfour!"

"And what of him?" I inquire, now thoroughly interested. "The Vicomte de Bois Crevé introduced him to me last week at Ostend." [I have known him, by the way, for some time. But I must have forgotten to tell Jack.]

"Oh, you know him, do you?" answers Jack, carelessly. "He is simply a cad with whom I had a row once."

"Why didn't you refuse to speak to him?" I ask. "Why didn't you kick him out?"

"Just because I didn't want to make a scene,"—in some confusion—"I merely bowed and went on with the game. As luck would have it, all the cards fell to Slumberton. Hands full of trumps; kings by the dozen; winning last tricks by a *pip*. My lord couldn't lose. And there was that infernal Balfour, who hates me like poison, watching me like a hawk. If I had tried to cheat, I couldn't have managed it for my life."

"You mean," I say, "you didn't because he was watching you."

Jack is too excited to feel insulted now.

"I never should think of cheating," he cries—"that is, not unless there was some necessity for it. I play fair, on principle, and because

I am a first-rate player. As for that Slumberton, he plays like a cow. But if I *had* cheated last night it would have been because the lout had the devil's own luck, and I should have considered it only fair to play the devil at his own game. As it was, Balfour never took his eyes off my fingers. The result was, I only got six games out of the twenty-one; and so Slumberton had me for £1,450!"

"You don't really mean it?" I exclaim in horror.

"I wish to God I didn't," groans he, sinking back on the sofa, and burying his face in his hands.

"*But how on earth* will you pay Lord Slumberton?" I inquire, more concerned than I care to own. If Jack is shown up in town, there is an end to all my hopes of help from him.

"I paid him last night," answers my partner, to my astonishment. "I had a good week's racing lately. And I knew I had £1,480 odd at the bank. Balfour was watching me with a sardonic grin on his ugly mug. So I laughed a jolly laugh, pulled out my cheque book, and gave Slumberton a cheque for the lot then and there."

"Poor old man," I say, now moved to pity. "So you're left with three tenners in the world."

"Bah! After all, who cares?" cries the captain, pulling himself together. "Perhaps it's another good investment, now I come to think of it. Nobody will be able to complain if I play Slumberton again for high stakes after this!"

A gentle knock at the door. Enter the faithful Norton, who bears a face wreathed in smiles.

"Mr. Shalliman and Lord Udolpho Daysey would like to know if you are up yet, sir?"

"Certainly I am up," answers Jack, beaming with a sudden joy. "Show them into the dining-room, and say I will be with them in five minutes. By the way, ask them what they will take."

Norton departs noiselessly as he had come.

"Now, my dear," taking my hand, "I shall have to send you away. But I *must* see you about your business. Can I call about five this afternoon?"

"No, Jack," I say, "I have some fogies coming. Be with me at seven to-morrow if it's all the same to you."

And so it is settled, and I vanish.

The thought that struck me was this: Algy Balfour is a nice young man, and probably very dull all alone in town.

He told me he always stayed at Long's. Why not invite *him* to tea to-day instead of Jack?

I think I should like to hear that story about "his row" with Jack *before* I see dear Jack again. Because dear Jack knows a great deal about *my* past. And I don't see why I shouldn't know as much as possible about *his!*

He shouldn't be so authoritative with me.

CHAPTER IV.

Algy Balfour.

ONE of the most awkward and inevitable drawbacks to a return to one's home is the invariable pile of bills awaiting one on the hall table. This unwelcome sight I have never known to fail me during the ten years I have managed to live in London—there they are as usual, some blue, some white, but all bearing their unmistakable mission on their horrid covers. Useless even to glance through them in search of a friendly note or a stray invitation. I do so mechanically each time I come home, but it is always with the certain conviction that I shall find nothing but demands for money more or less insolently expressed. To-day I have hurriedly looked them over, but the result is precisely what I knew it would be. "We beg to call your attention." "A cheque will oblige." "Heavy expenses unexpectedly incurred," etc., etc., all their hateful cant expressions—I know them every one by heart, and, I must say, pay very little heed to them. There is a sameness and monotony about the excuses of these duns. There has been a domestic bereavement, or a heavy trade loss, or they are being pressed themselves by the wholesale house, until you think of the man who, when his tailor had come to almost the last excuse, sent a cheque with the significant observation that he felt it a measure of prudence to no longer patronize a house, the persistent misfortunes of which, financial and domestic, were

an obvious indication to his mind of divine dissatisfaction with its members. After tossing the bills aside on the drawing-room table, I cannot help pondering on the extreme improbability of their ever being paid now that Jack's resources have been so distressingly curtailed.

"I wonder if Algy would like to pay my bills?" I say to myself with a smile, as I once more take them off the table and run through the items. Elaine, £270 (preposterous, for three dresses and a cloak). Gautier, £38 for boots and shoes. (I had no idea I walked so much.) £60 wine bill (how frightfully necessities mount up), and then a packet of smaller fry, taxes, rates, butcher, baker, candle-stick maker, etc., they are all there, and a pretty alarming total they make. Well, "*où il y a rien le roi perd ses droits.*" They had better not be too clamorous, or I shall have to desert them altogether and "never come back no more," like the impecunious gentleman in the Gaiety burlesque. *I* don't know how bills run up so! I don't seem to live extravagantly, but evidently £600 a year is unable to cope with my requirements, and that is all I possess. Yes, "*dere diry*" (as the "Bad Boy" says), I have only a paltry little yearly income of £600 on which to dress, eat, drink, and generally deport myself as a lady!

No wonder then that never having read that doubtless excellent work, "How to dress on £15 a year as a lady, by a lady," I should always be up to my eyes in debt. Shall I leave these nasty-looking bits of paper on the table for Algy to see, and put on a face of despair when he arrives, or had I better wait till I know him a little better? He is immensely rich, but I think I saw in some weekly paper that he was going to be married; and though at Ostend he professed admiration —to use no stronger term—for me, I scarcely think this is the moment in which to touch on my financial difficulties. No, I must wallow in trouble and humiliation till some good fairy comes to extricate me from my position. I am speculating as to the form the good fairy will take, and whether "it" will be a male or female fairy—very little speculation

as to *this* is required—when a knock at the door comes, and my servant announces Mr. Balfour.

Algy looks *rayonnant.* I never saw him looking better, and tell him so with undisguised admiration. He naturally says the same of me, and adds that he thinks I am looking much younger.

"Your improved appearance has a cause," say I. "If report be true you are going to be married."

"Report for once does not lie," he says, beaming all over. "I am going to marry the most charming girl in all England, and I want you to congratulate me."

What fools men are! Surely he cannot believe that my congratulations will be sincere or worth having. What pleasure can I have in hearing that some country *ingénue*, or Belgravian hack, has secured this matrimonial prize? "I congratulate you *de confiance*," I say, with affected *bonhommie*, "though until I know who the paragon is I cannot do so *really*." Then he tells me he is going to marry Miss Vyse, an only daughter, rich, lovely, well-bred, and with the disposition of an angel. "You must bring her to see me," I say, patronizingly; but his "yes" is a very doubtful one, and he murmurs something about her having very little time in town before the wedding. "And when is that to take place?" I ask, concealing my mortification as well as I can.

"In about a month," he answers, "at her father's place, Critchell, in Shropshire. I am going to bury my *vie de garçon* on Thursday night," he continues. "I have asked a lot of our set to come to supper. I hope you will come; we are going to the play first, and there will be poker afterwards."

This speech is so thoroughly manlike—one asks them for bread and they give you a stone; I ask him for an introduction to the girl he is engaged to, and in its place he offers me an invitation to a rowdy supper-party, where half-tipsy men and *declassé* women will alone be present. 'Ah, well! I accept with a good grace; one must not be

squeamish when one has to get on in the world, and is up to one's eyes in debt.

What fool was it who wrote "Poverty is no crime?" I know no greater. It urges one to commit every sin under the sun, and few there are, indeed, that cannot be laid at the door of that foulest of curses. Do you think, my dear diary, for instance, that I would entertain the idea of his stupid supper, with its horrid drunken men and berouged women, if I were not compelled to? And what compels me?—Poverty!

He has seen my bills on the table, and looks at them smiling—*eh bien tant pis!* I don't care. I had not time to hide them before he was announced.

"You are looking at my love-letters," I say, smiling.

"They don't look very loving," he remarks.

"They are from my duns," I say boldly. "They take greater interest in my movements than any of my friends. They call to see me by day; they are delighted when I return from abroad; and they write to me by every post. Does not that look like love?"

"It's not the sort of love I should care about," he says.

"No; but then you are very rich, and don't know what it is to be bothered for money, I suppose?"

"I am not very rich, and I often am bothered for money," he says, "by people who very often ought to know better, but who appear to lose all self-respect in their desire to enrich themselves at my expense."

Is this meant for me? Is it a broad hint for me not to have recourse to his well-lined purse? If so, it is quite the rudest speech I ever heard. At any rate, I have sufficient tact not to take it personally, and, putting on a face of condolence say—"Ah, yes; subscriptions, I suppose, and those sort of things."

"No; generally loans," he says, "which I need scarcely tell you are never repaid."

Evidently this is not his day, and I adroitly change the conversation.

"Are there any poker players in town?" I ask.

"Yes," he tells me, "a few of the old set who are passing through town for the back end meetings at Newmarket."

Then we talk a little racing, and he gives me an infallible tip for the Liverpool Cup, but does not offer to put me anything on.

After a slight pause I say, "You know Jack Fortinbras, don't you?"

"Very slightly," is his answer, coldly given. "Why do you ask me?"

"Oh, I don't know, only that I met him this morning in Bond Street. He told me he was the only man in town. Don't you like him?"

"No!" emphatically, "I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I have reason to know that he is an unscrupulous scoundrel."

"Grand Dieu! That is very sweeping," I say with affected terror. "What has he done? Run away with some one's wife? Got some one to back his worthless bills? Or introduced superfluous nines into a pack of cards at baccarat?"

"He may have done all these things," says Balfour calmly; "I believe him capable of anything; at any rate he is not a man to know."

"But what is his particular crime?" I persist. "Generalities are so very unsatisfactory."

"I heard a very black story about him last night, and have made up my mind to cut him."

This is getting interesting.

"What was the black story?"

"Well, I can scarcely tell you. It was a case of *chantage*, however."

Chantage! How well I know dear Jack's *faible.* Have I not suffered bitterly from it myself, and am I not completely at his mercy through my idiotcy in writing him compromising letters?

"Yes, I don't like that idea," I say, "and was he successful in his attempt?"

"For a time, I believe, until the lady——but really, I ought not to be telling you all this, only I believe half London knows it."

"Yes, pray go on. Of course it is quite *entre nous.*"

"I think I had better leave you to find out the story for yourself."

How madly provoking he is.

"No, you must satisfy my curiosity now you have gone so far. Besides, why should not I be included in the half London that knows of it?"

"Well, then, the lady—she was only a girl of twenty-three, an heiress with pots of money—had recourse to her guardian, and he put the matter in the hands of his lawyer, and Mr. Fortinbras got a letter in answer to his demands, which I believe quite altered the tone of his future correspondence, though he did not part with the lady's letters until he received, some people say, £2000; but I have heard various sums quoted. However, it has materially reduced his income, for I am told he used to make a couple of thousand a-year out of the unfortunate girl. You see it is not a pleasant story."

No, it is not a pleasant story, but it is a useful one for me to know, and Mr. Jack will not find me quite so pliable in his hands now that I can refer him to his correspondence with the lawyer.

"Of course you won't mention this to any one?" says Algy, as he gets up to leave. "I only told it you as a warning against such an unprincipled brute."

"Thanks, very much," I say, laughing; "but I don't think your warning is very necessary. I am not a *jeune fille* to begin with, and I have no fortune to be *exploitée* by Captain Fortinbras." And then he

goes and I am left alone to ponder over this new villainy of Jack's. It is really a *comble* of vileness, this *chantage* on a young girl. I did not think that he would ever become such a miserable cur as that. And the £1450 he paid Slumberton was evidently part of the produce of this transaction, and his good week's racing a paltry lie. Strange that Jack cannot even be frank with me! Always lies, always subterfuges, and to me who tell him everything! Do I though? No, I think there are one or two little secrets, diary, that only you are told, and that we will always keep to ourselves, having now seen how very unworthy our friend Jack is of our confidence.

CHAPTER V.

I Dine with Captain Fortinbras.

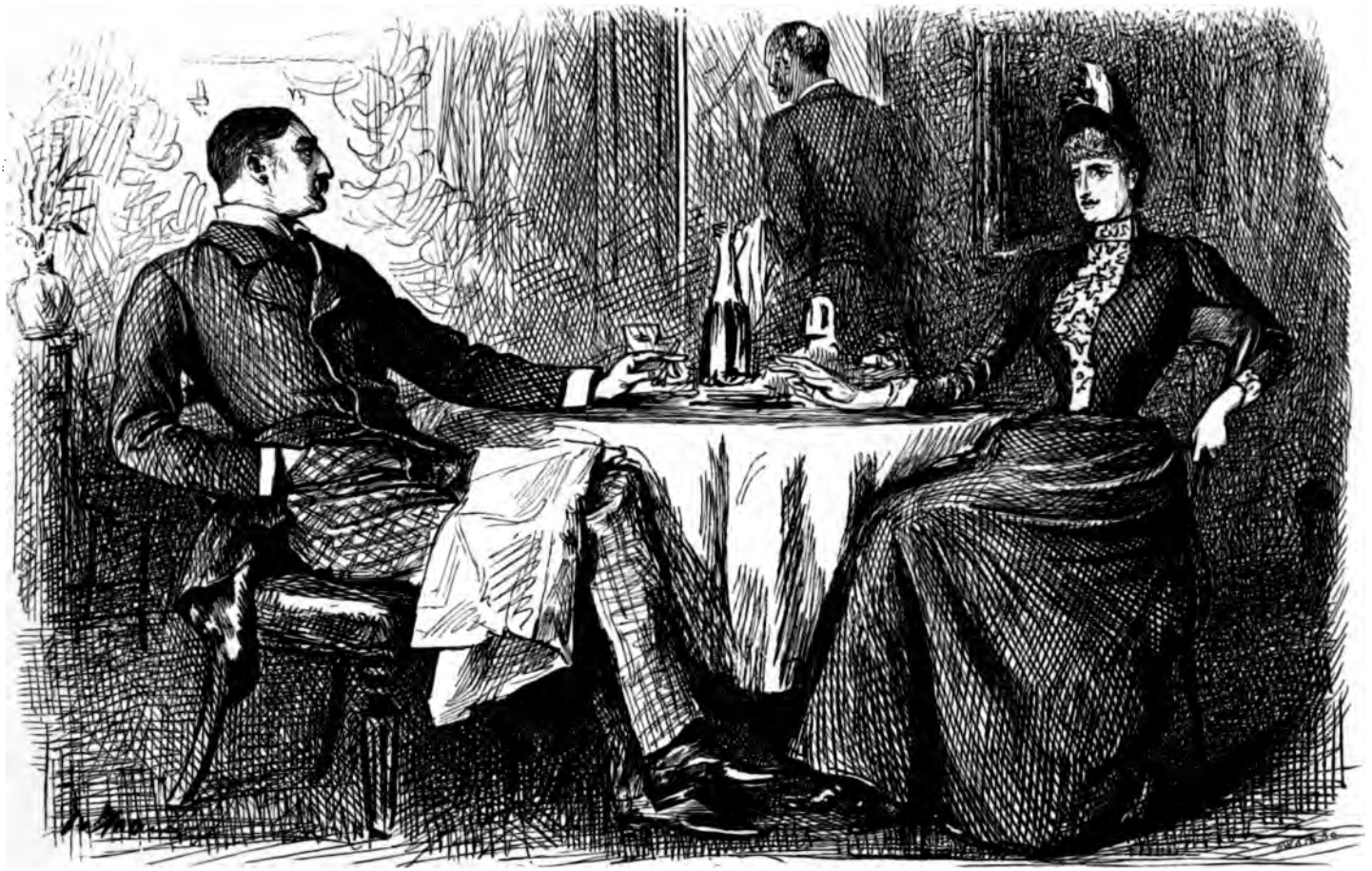
AT seven Jack arrives and begs me to come and dine with him at some French *gargotte* in Soho, where excellent cooking may be obtained at a ridiculously low price.

It does not sound a tempting invitation, but it is preferable to dining alone in the present disorganized state of my household, so I accept with a certain amount of gratitude. We whirl through dreary slums in a hansom, and soon drive up to a third-rate hotel, on the steps of which are lounging several dirty and unshaven foreigners, smoking cigarettes. Jack asks for a private sitting-room, in villainous French, but with the air of a man who has £40,000 a year.

The dinner is certainly good of its kind, but Jack is in one of his morose humours, and is anything but an agreeable companion.

When we have satisfactorily disposed of the more substantial dishes, we each light a cigarette, and Jack, leaning back with his legs crossed, asks me what are my plans.

"Plans?" say I. "What a question to ask! As if I had any plans in my life. I live *au jour le jour*, as you know, and never bother about the future. I am going to stay in London until I get some invitations to the country, and shall be backwards and forwards till it is time to go to Monte Carlo."



When we have satisfactorily disposed of the more substantial dishes, we each light a cigarette, and Jack, leaning back with his legs crossed, asks me what are my plans.

"Monte Carlo!" says Jack, contemptuously; "the amount of money you have lost in that hole!"

"Don't call the most beautiful spot on the earth a *hole*, Jack; and if I have lost money it has not been yours."

"Nor yours either," he adds, sardonically.

"Well, then, what are you complaining of? Money can't run through one's fingers without some of it sticking to one's palm; and if I have a talent for inventing systems, and inducing my friends to invest their capital in them, I really don't see that it is any business of yours."

"But you never win."

"Ah, my dear Jack, that is the fault of the tables. *I* do my best."

"Have you any money to spare now?" says Jack, after a slight pause.

I burst out laughing in his face. "Money to spare! Who ever had any money to spare? Your question is about the most *naive* one I ever heard."

"How should I know what you have been up to at Ostend?" growls Captain Fortinbras. "You may have made a *coup* of some sort or other."

"I am afraid that the days for making *coups* are very much on the wane, my dear boy," I say; "and if you could see the piteous array of bills on my table at home, you would scarcely ask me if I have any money to spare."

"Well, I shall have to get some somewhere."

"'Somewhere' is vague; but I know that with you it is an infallible resource. You have something in your mind's eye?"

"No, really I haven't. To begin with, there is not a soul in town. And pray who are you going to honour with your company in the country?" he continues.

"I am going to stay with the Gages, in Buckinghamshire," I assert

with a certain amount of recklessness. "I believe they have a delightful old place."

"What! Sir Thomas and Lady Gage?" says Jack in utter astonishment.

"Yes," reply I, coolly. "Do you know them?"

"No—yes—I mean I did once."

"I am afraid, my dear Jack, that your circle of acquaintances is rather decreasing; mine, on the contrary, you see is increasing."

"You are a wonderful woman, but with all regard for your veracity I very much doubt your being invited to stay with the Gages."

"They are a very slow old couple and tremendously *collet monté*, I know; but for all that, they took a fancy to me, you see. I met them at Ostend, and Lady Damer, their cousin, who is a great friend of mine, having a little affair of her own on at the time, was perpetually throwing them on my hands to give herself greater freedom, so we became immense friends."

"Extraordinary!" murmurs Jack.

"Not at all," say I. "I talked parish schools and penny readings by the hour to Lady Gage; and as for Sir Thomas, I took such an interest in his rheumatism, or lumbago, or whatever he suffers from—I really forget which it is, these old men have such confusing complaints—that I believe he scarcely exists until he sees me again."

"And so you are going to stay with them?"

"Yes: and then Lady Damer and I are going to Newmarket. There will be some money to be made there; we share a house together for the week—and those are all the plans I have made at present."

Jack does not look over-pleased at my social triumphs. He is so thoroughly out of it himself that I am confident there is a touch of jealousy in his displeasure, though he really ought to be only too delighted to think that I am likely to make my way. With all his faults

I like old Jack, and he knows perfectly well that I would never leave him in the lurch or fail to see him through any of his numerous financial difficulties. But really if this story of Balfour's be true, Jack is indeed beyond the hope of any salvation. "All the king's horses and all the king's men won't set Humpty Dumpty up again." I cannot be dragged down to his level, and dear Jack must be plainly shown this somewhat unpleasant fact.

I dare not touch upon the subject, however; and besides, at the present moment, there is really no occasion to do so. It must be my trump card, to be played only at the most desperate stage of the game, when Jack becomes too troublesome and requires a settler.

He proposes that we should walk home, but I do not see the force of parading through the slums of London on his arm, so we pay the bill—that is to say, I pay the bill—and we once more enter a hansom and drive home.

On the table I find a note from Lady Damer: "I am in town for a few days. Come to luncheon to-morrow. Pray forget our little disagreement at Ostend. Ever affectionately yours."

"Tidings of comfort and joy!" I shall see or hear something of the Gages. My visit to them of which I have just been speaking in such positive terms is now at any rate a probability.

With the greatest effusion and delight, I press Jack to partake of a brandy-and-soda, which he is nothing loth to do, and comes grumbling up the stairs after me.

"You seem to have had good news," he remarks.

"Excellent," I reply.

"Money?" he inquires.

"No;—position," I say, laughing. "Only another invitation; it's from my dear friend, Lady Damer. She wants me to go to luncheon there to-morrow. What a pity you don't know her, Jack."

"I know all *about* her," he says, with a sneer.

"And don't you think she is a nice acquaintance for me?" I ask, innocently.

He merely growls and shrugs his shoulders.

"My dear Jack, you are in a vile temper," I say, at last, exasperated by his continued ill-humour. "You really should keep your pecker up: there is plenty of corn in Egypt."

"There may be in *Egypt*," he answers, with the most depressed voice; "but I see very little chance of it coming my way." And then he takes up his hat, and I am not sorry to see him making preparations for departure.

As soon as he is gone I run upstairs, and put myself in Félicie's hands, who carefully removes my plaits and gingerly applies the comb to what is left on my head. I indulge in a delicious reverie whilst this operation is being performed, and am soon lost in social triumphs of a most superior nature. I see myself far away from London and its degrading associations, settled in a fine country house with a brilliant position, adulated by parishioners, and doing the Lady Bountiful. I kill Lady Gage very early in the reverie, and marry Sir Thomas with equal promptitude, and then, when I have reached the apex of my glory, Félicie has finished my hair, and I wake up to the reality that I have nothing more substantial to look forward to than a doubtful week at Newmarket and Algy Balfour's poker party.

Verily, from the sublime to the ridiculous, I think; and I cannot help smiling at my far-fetched castles in the air.

"Madame wants some new hair," says Félicie, disdainfully turning over my plaits on the table.

"Madame wants a great many things that she is not likely to get," I observe rather crossly, hopping into bed.

"*Ah! ces hommes! le meilleur ne vaut pas quatre sous*," says Félicie, and with this enigmatic remark she leaves me to sleep the sleep of the just.

CHAPTER VI.

At Denston.

London, October.

THE next day about two I start for Lady Damer's. She has taken a house in Chapel Street, Park Lane, and has just moved into it.

On my road thither I discuss with myself the reason of her sudden burst of affection, but as my house in Curzon Street is little more than a quarter of a mile from hers, I have not arrived at any satisfactory conclusion by the time I drive up to the door. Lady Damer receives me with the utmost enthusiasm, and gives me the warmest welcome. She kisses me effusively, and says, "I am so glad, darling, to see you again. Will you ever forgive my rudeness and absurd jealousy at Ostend?" "Of course I will, dearest Augusta," I reply; "I have already forgotten all about it."

What on earth is the meaning of all this? At no time during our lengthened friendship has Lady Damer been thus demonstrative. However, I suppose that I shall soon solve the riddle.

Almost immediately after my arrival luncheon is announced. "I have asked no one but you, dear Lena," says Lady Damer, "because I was anxious to have a quiet chat with you, and talk over the immediate future. What have you decided to do? Nothing as yet, I trust."

"No, I am perfectly free for the moment," I reply.

"Very well, dear. The Gages, who came back with me, have asked

me to go down to their country place on Friday, and I will get you an invitation if you care to go with me."

"I should like it of all things," I say, "but I don't think Lady Gage has taken a great fancy to me, to put the matter very mildly."

"You are quite mistaken, Lena," answers Lady Damer. "On the contrary, she referred to you most kindly in one of her letters. However, be that as it may, I can arrange it if you like."

"I shall only be too charmed," I say. "Do you know who is going to be there?"

"Not in the least, but I believe that it is to be a large party."

"Well," I say, smiling, "I have no doubt that we shall manage, somehow or other, to amuse ourselves."

"Not much fear about that," she answers.

But throughout my visit, which lasted until nearly half-past six, not one atom of information was I able to glean from which I could possibly draw any conclusion with regard to the marvellous change in Lady Damer's attitude towards me.

We parted in the same cordial fashion that we met, and it was settled that we should go down by the same train on Friday to Denston Park, the Gages' place.

Two days after this I receive the following letter from Lady Gage:—

"*Denston Park, Bucks, Wednesday.*

"My dear Mrs. Despard,—Lady Damer tells me that she saw you yesterday, and that she believes that you have no settled plans for the moment. If this is the case, and you will forgive so short a notice, Sir Thomas and I will be delighted if you will join our party on Friday, and remain as long as you can. We are both most anxious to renew your charming acquaintance, and sincerely trust that you will be able to come.

"Very truly yours, Emily Gage.

"P.S.—I should have written to you before, and given you longer notice, but I did not know your address."

Although I am perfectly aware that Augusta must have brought about this state of things for her own ends, I must yet confess to possessing considerable feelings of gratitude towards her.

I cannot resist showing Lady Gage's letter to Jack when he calls, forgetting that I had previously told him that I had already been invited. "Liars should have good memories," saith the proverb; but in this case it does not particularly matter, for Jack is so astonished at the letter, at which he gazes with a thunderstruck look, that he fails to notice my little slip, or at any rate he makes no comment on the subject.

"I wish to Heaven I could get down there too. Something might be worked between us, and I must have money soon, or, by God, I'll shoot myself!"

"Don't talk like an idiot," I say. "Directly I get down there I'll see what is to be done; although, to tell you candidly, I don't think there is much chance."

Jack goes away gloomily enough, and I commence to make the necessary preparations for my visit.

First I answer Lady Gage's letter, and say—

"My dear Lady Gage,—I have just received your kind invitation, which it gives me much pleasure to accept.

"I will find out from Lady Damer what train she is going down by, and we will come together.

"Thank you very much for your kind expressions of goodwill towards me,

"And believe me,

"Very sincerely yours,

"Lena Despard.

"P.S.—My kindest regards to Sir Thomas. I trust he is better."

By dint of a small payment down, and by profuse promises of further remittances, I manage to persuade Elaine to let me have two

new dresses, which she undertakes to send down next week. I then write to Algy Balfour, and tell him how sorry I am that I cannot come to his poker party. I tell him also that I am leaving town, but do not say where I am going to.

When Friday comes I find that after all I am unable to go by so early a train as the one Lady Damer has decided upon, and therefore wire her that I shall be down by a later one.

At last I start. The journey is not long, and the train soon arrives at Buckingham. I find that they have sent the carriage to meet me, and in a few minutes I am whirling away towards the Gages' ancestral halls. If they only knew me in my true colours, I wonder what sort of greeting I should receive! Denston Hall is six or seven miles from the station, but the horses are fast, and we quickly reach it. It is dark, and I cannot see very much of either house or grounds; but it strikes me as being a magnificent place.

Sir Thomas and Lady Gage both receive me in the hall, and are more than kind; and although I have my own opinion as to the latter's sincerity, I have certainly nothing to complain of.

This is, perhaps, my last chance, and I am fully determined to make a *coup* of some sort or other before I leave the country. My credit is half gone, and my reputation has almost entirely vanished, and if I do not *ranger* myself with as little delay as possible, I may find that it is too late. Lady Gage insists on taking me to my room herself, and shortly afterwards I go to her boudoir, where there are four or five ladies having tea. The men have not yet returned from shooting; but there is an extraordinary individual of the æsthetic type, with hair down his back and an immense turndown collar. This young gentleman does not shoot or hunt, and is in every sense a carpet knight. At present this singular specimen of humanity is reciting some poetry—presumably of his own composition—to Mrs. Broadways, the Bishop's wife, who, with eager glances and bated

breath, is drinking in every word of the effete nonsense that this idiot is uttering. If there is one class of beings that I loathe more than another, it is the æsthetes. They don't in the least amuse me, and there is nothing to be got out of them.

I don't know a soul in the room, but when Lady Gage presents me, I fancy that I am somewhat coldly received. I ask after Lady Damer, and am told that she is resting after her journey. Just before dressing for dinner, I go to her room. There is a young girl kneeling by the fire. She is strikingly beautiful, with a high-bred, refined, and singularly expressive face, a small, well-shaped head, dark hair, and big blue dreamy eyes. She is tall, and has a superb figure. "Beatrice," says Lady Damer, in addressing her as she rises on my entrance, "this is Mrs. Despard, of whom I have so often spoken to you. Lena, you recollect Mr. Balfour, whom we met at Ostend? This is the young lady who is just going to make him a happy man. Let me present you to Miss Vyse."

* * * * * *

On going down to the drawing-room, the first person I see is my old friend Frank Fairfield, of the Coldstreams. Frank is a good-looking young man of about twenty-five, with fair hair and blue eyes, blessed with an excellent constitution, a perfect temper, and twenty-five thousand a year. He has, moreover, a castle and a deer forest in Scotland, an estate in Hampshire, and a house in St. James's Square. We have been fast friends ever since he was a boy at Eton, and if the truth must be told, I believe that I was his first love. However, all that nonsense is now over, although we are still the staunchest allies possible.

He comes up to me and shakes hands.

"My dear Frank," I say, "you are the very last person I expected to see. Whatever brought you here?"

"I hope you are not disappointed," he replies, "and I came

here three or four days ago, because I was asked by my aunt, Lady Gage."

"Is Lady Gage an aunt of yours? I had no idea of it!"

"Yes," he says, laughing, "I have one or two respectable relatives, although you probably wouldn't imagine it."

When dinner is announced I am, much to my delight, told off to Frank, and as my other neighbour, a bucolic individual of some seventy summers, bestows undivided attention on his dinner, and does not trouble me with any conversation whatever, I am able to make the most of the Guardsman.

He questions me as to all my recent doings, and naturally I tell him just as much as I think proper.

"Lady G. was asking me the other day if I knew you," says Frank.

"Indeed!" I reply. "I hope that you did not give me a very bad character."

"No," he says. "I am not one of those individuals who habitually speak the truth."

"You impudent boy! how dare you?" Nothing that Frank says ever offends me.

He goes on. "Have you seen Jack Fortinbras lately? Poor old Jack! I am afraid he has come rather to grief."

"Yes; I only met him the other day; and although he has not exactly come to grief, yet I fear he's in rather low water just at present."

"I don't care a straw what any one says against old Jack," he continues; "if he is a scoundrel, he's a very amusing one. He has always run perfectly straight with me, and I fully intend to stick to him."

"My dear Frank, you are one of the most generous-hearted men I know."

"Not at all," he says. "By the way, you saw him last; is there any single thing I can do for the poor old boy?"

"Yes," I reply. "Ask your aunt to invite him down here."

At this moment Lady Gage gives the signal for departure, and with the rest of the ladies I troop into the drawing-room.

I commence talking to Lady Damer, and we are soon joined by Mrs. Broadways, the Bishop's wife, a short, fat, ill-dressed person of about eight-and-forty, with the manners of a housemaid and the arrogance of a *tambour major*. Lady Damer introduces me, and soon afterwards goes off to talk to Lady Gage.

Strange as it may appear, I am always being brought in contact with religious people, or to speak more correctly, the clerical element. And whether they are High Church, Low Church, Broad Church, or No Church; whether they are Armenians, Calvinists, Baptists, or Jews, I always get on well with them, for I have an unfailing recipe for so doing. It is this. When the religious topic is started always affect to disagree with the enthusiast, and then let him or her gradually convert you to their mode of thinking. Say that the matter has never before been presented to you in so clear a way; that what was always perplexing to you is now clear as day; and that the arguments adduced are unanswerable. This flatters the individual to the top of his bent, and if you are careful to follow up the favourable impression that you will have created, you have made a friend for life.

It was thus in a great measure that I succeeded in getting over Lady Gage at Ostend; it is thus that I now make a friend of the Bishop's wife. She goes over the whole ground from the time of the publication of the Essays and Reviews until the present date, and I listen as if in rapt attention. I rarely interpose, and when I do it is merely to exclaim, "Ah, now you have made the point clear to me for the first time! Thank you so much for the trouble you are taking; now I understand it."

The result of my half-hour's martyrdom—for the lecture continues until the men come in—is that I have thoroughly ingratiated myself with Mrs. Broadways, and Lady Damer afterwards tells me that she hears her observe to Lady Gage, "What a very superior person Mrs. Despard is—so wonderfully intelligent; it is really a pleasure to talk to her!"

What a humbug I am! However, I can't help it. One must live by one's wits, or otherwise, and it is necessary that mine should be brought pretty frequently into requisition to eke out my miserable £600 a year.

Directly the men return Frank comes up to me and says, "Oh! about what you were asking me—of course I will arrange it; when do you think Fortinbras could come?"

"At once, I should fancy," is my answer.

"I will speak to Lady Gage to-night," says Frank, "and will send Jack a wire in the morning."

Thank Heaven, that is settled. I don't quite know what Jack wants here on his own account, but I have quite determined what I want him to do for me, and that is to make up to Miss Vyse, and, if possible, compromise her in some way, and so break off or, at any rate, postpone her marriage with Algy Balfour.

For mad as you may think me, my dear diary, I have made up my mind, *per fas aut nefas*, to secure dear Algy to myself.

From my experience of him at Ostend, I am quite confident that, Miss Vyse out of the way, it would be very plain sailing.

I must candidly confess that I feel an awful wretch to thus plot against a young girl's happiness; but, after all, *chacun pour soi et Dieu pour tous.*

Miss Vyse is very young; I should scarcely think that she is twenty, and she has all her life before her. I, *par contre*, am considerably over thirty, and the less I say about my past the better. But

now I have the strongest possible yearning towards the respectable, and am determined to succeed in my object; and if a hundred young girls stood in my way I should be utterly remorseless.

I see scarcely anything of Miss Vyse this evening, as she is rather unwell and goes to bed quite early. Poor girl! if she only knew the trap that was being prepared for her! After all, if I am successful, I verily believe that it will be the best thing in the world for Algy. I am sure that I shall make him an excellent wife, a far better one than his present *fiancée*.

Young girls don't understand men, and it takes them six or eight years before they know how to make them comfortable.

Well, I have made a good beginning to-night. Jack will doubtless be here in eight-and-forty hours, and when once he starts a scheme that is likely to benefit him, he is what Frank Fairfield calls a "flyer."

The Bishop's wife wishes me the most cordial good night, as also does Lady Gage, whose good opinion I have entirely regained; and with a mind thoroughly contented and a conscience that has at all events ceased to annoy me, without the aid of chloral I sink into the most delicious, dreamless sleep, and do not awake until Félicie appears with my chocolate the next morning.

While I am dressing my mind reverts to the subject of Lady Damer. Do what I will I cannot divine the object of her sudden affection. If she does not soon show her cards, feminine curiosity will triumph, and I shall have to ask her point blank. However, it is a good fairy that has been at work, for anything more fortunate than the recent course of events it is impossible to conceive.

My good night's rest has considerably benefitted my personal appearance, and when I am dressed, and look at myself in the cheval glass, I am so satisfied with what I see reflected that a feeling of regret comes over me that Algy Balfour is not here.

About eleven I go down to breakfast, and meet Frank Fairfield coming out of the dining-room.

"Good morning, Lena," he says. "Jack is coming. I was up early this morning, and telegraphed to him, and have just got his reply. Here it is."

And there it is, sure enough.

"From Captain Fortinbras, Albany,

To Captain Fairfield,

Denston Park, Bucks.

"Just got yours. Thanks, awfully. Shall be down to-night in time for dinner."

CHAPTER VII.

That Wicked Sir Thomas.

Plus l'assaut est rapide et vigoureux, plus la reddition est certaine.

Denston Park, Bucks, October.

AT breakfast some one proposes that those ladies who care about it should walk out with the shooting party.

No one appears to exhibit any alacrity in accepting this invitation, but at last Miss Vyse says, "I should like it of all things if any other lady will come too."

I am down her throat in a moment.

"I shall be delighted," I say. "Shall we go and get ready?" And so it is settled.

Needless to add that I endure a perfect martyrdom tramping along wet fields with thin boots, one of which I nearly leave in a morass that we are compelled to cross.

But in spite of all the terrible discomfort that I go through, in spite of returning footsore, wet to the skin, shivering and ill, and with all the premonitory symptoms of a violent cold—in spite of all this, I say, I am very glad that I went, for it has enabled me to have Miss Vyse to myself for the greater part of the day, and to gain a thorough insight into her character, tastes, and peculiarities. What I might have been weeks in finding out in the stray and interrupted conversations that one has in a country house, I have ascertained during our walk; and having speedily gathered that Miss Vyse is of a somewhat jealous disposition, I have

played my cards accordingly. I soon drew the conversation, which at first was of a general character, round to the subject of her *fiancé*.

"I was never so surprised in my life, my dear, as when I heard that Mr. Balfour was going to be married, but all my surprise vanishes when I look at you."

"Indeed!" she answered, "and how was that?"

"That is a little secret, my dear child, which perhaps one day I will tell you, but you must not press me now."

"Oh, pray, Mrs. Despard, don't let us have any mystery about this. You have been so sympathetic and kind to me that I feel I have known you for ages instead of only a few hours. I am sure that there is something about Algy that I ought to know, and which you are keeping back from me. Do tell me everything, I implore!"

"There is really very little to tell," I answer, "but you must excuse my saying anything more on the subject at the present moment. Later on, if I think it necessary for your happiness, I will tell you."

This little conversation had precisely the effect that I had intended. It left Miss Vyse full of all sorts of jealous doubts with regard to her future, and it has prepared the ground for the seed that I intend to sow at no very distant date—in fact, upon the first favourable opportunity. I have by this time thoroughly established myself in Miss Vyse's confidence, and I feel certain that my task will be much easier than even I at first anticipated. The only circumstance that could possibly have marred the success of my scheme would have been the advent of Algy himself.

But my mind was speedily set at rest on this subject.

"Is Mr. Balfour likely to come and stay here during your visit?" I asked.

"No," she replied. "He does not know the Gages, but Lady Gage has made me promise to bring him after we are married. I dare say that will be almost immediately after the honeymoon."

"I am sure that there is something about Algy that I ought to know."

Miss Vyse is, therefore, entirely at my mercy, and I shall not long delay in striking the necessary blow.

On going down to the drawing-room in the evening, I am glad to see that Jack has arrived. He is talking to Lady Gage, and as far as any one can gather anything from her utterly expressionless countenance, Master Jack has succeeded in re-establishing himself in her good graces.

To-night I am taken down to dinner by the Dean of the diocese, a High Churchman with a strong bias against the Bishop.

I need scarcely say I play up to his weaknesses, and before dinner is over I believe that he is almost prepared to throw to the winds of heaven his pet theory with regard to the celibacy of the clergy, and contemplates making me a proposal.

The idea of my becoming a clergyman's wife is too ludicrous for serious consideration; still if everything else failed, I might certainly do worse. I shall most assuredly keep the Dean on the hooks. He is a remarkably handsome man, about fifty years of age, with clear-cut features, very tall, and a perfect figure. He has got plenty of brains, and, judging from his conversation, I should think that he might become a Prime Minister, if he did not wear a black coat. But he is evidently as weak as water in the hands of a woman who knows what she is about, and, as I said before, I have no intention of losing sight of him.

It is some time before I get an opportunity to speak to Jack, but when it arrives I say, "Get up early to-morrow morning, and meet me at half-past eight at the end of the avenue. I have got a grand scheme afloat, but you and I had better not be too confidential in public."

"Great Heavens!" says Jack. "Why drag me out of bed in the middle of the night? Surely there is no occasion to fix such an ungodly hour as half-past eight?"

"Don't be a fool, Jack," is my answer "Do I ever do anything without a motive? My present game is a big one, and I do not intend

to throw any chance away. It is absolutely necessary that I should have half an hour's uninterrupted conversation with you, and the less we are seen together the better."

"All right," he says. "I dare say you know best. Thanks, awfully, for getting me asked down here, for of course it was you who managed it. Old Frank is a capital fellow, but I am sure he would never have thought of it if you had not put it into his head."

"Of course I managed it," I say; "it was for both our advantages. I will make your fortune this time, if you will only be guided by me. But now go away, I don't want to be seen talking to you."

Then he goes, and the Dean comes up to me and never leaves me until the ladies go to bed. As we are retiring Miss Vyse whispers to me, "Come to my room, Mrs. Despard; I so much want to talk to you."

"Very well, dear," I say, "I will be with you in a few minutes."

"Don't be long," she replies, "I am dying to speak to you."

Directly I come in she returns to the attack on the subject of Algy —she is sure that there is some mystery about him, something that she ought to know, and that I am keeping from her.

Her manner is so excited, and she appears so thoroughly determined to sift to the bottom my vague inuendoes on the subject of her lover, that I feel my hand being rapidly forced.

"Dearest Mrs. Despard, I will not let you go until you tell me what it all means. From a motive of mistaken kindness you are keeping something back from me."

"I am sorry that by an unguarded slip of the tongue I have been so unfortunate as to raise your suspicions, my dear."

"What has Algy done, Mrs. Despard? If it is anything disgraceful or dishonourable, although it were to kill me, I will never speak to him again."

"My sweet child, if those are really your views, I think it is my

duty to let you know that Mr. Balfour was engaged to me at the time he proposed to you."

My heart smites me as I look at the young girl. She turns ashy pale, and murmuring in choking accents, "Oh, Algy, Algy," sinks almost senseless on the floor.

* * * * * *

After considerable difficulty I succeeded, in some measure, in pacifying the unfortunate girl; and I finally left her, having comforted her as best I could.

"I will never speak to him again," she said. "I will return all his letters. And, dearest Mrs. Despard, how much I grieve for you! What you must have suffered! How ignoble has been his conduct!" she ejaculated. "Just imagine his daring to propose to me when you were his promised wife! How truly noble of you to keep all this back from me until your sense of duty compelled you to reveal it. I can never be sufficiently grateful to you."

"Good night, darling. God bless you," was my reply, as I left her to go to my own room.

My conduct has certainly been most Judas-like. But *que voulez-vous?* What I have done was absolutely necessary to carry my point, and to effect a rupture between Algy and Miss Vyse. The match will now, of course, be broken off, and I must see if I cannot find another husband for this charming *ingénue.*

"Félicie, you are to call me at seven o'clock to-morrow morning," I say, on dismissing my maid for the night, and recollecting my early rendezvous with Jack.

"Oui, madame," Félicie replies; and, to do her justice, I am convinced that she would make the same answer if I told her to cut my throat, or to get ready to start for China at an hour's notice.

Félicie has one good point, and that is that nothing shocks, nothing astonishes her. And although I occasionally give her notice, I have not

the slightest intention of parting with her, for she thoroughly understands me and acts accordingly.

When I am awakened at that fiendish hour in the morning, I wish that the whole affair was buried in the bottomless pit. I have had a somewhat uneasy night, and have only got into a really comfortable sleep about an hour before I am called. However, in these matters it is useless to prolong the agony, so I make a dash for it, and jump out of bed.

By half-past eight I am at the end of the Avenue, and find that Jack has already arrived at our place of meeting.

"And now, Lena, what's all this about?" he says.

Then I tell him, dear diary, just what I have told you, and the state of the game up to the present point.

He listens attentively, and does not once interrupt me. When I have finished, he says, "I don't much like all this. Of course I don't care a rap about that brute Balfour; and, in fact, anything that I could do to upset him I would do. But I'm very sorry for that poor girl. I took her in to dinner last night, and she is a little ripper."

"Since when, my dear Jack, have you begun to be so squeamish," I answer. "If report does not belie you, you have not always posed as a champion of our sex. But I am so delighted to hear that you have taken such a fancy to Miss Vyse, for, my dear boy, I intend you to marry her. That is part of my plan."

"By Jove, Lena! That alters everything," blurts out Jack, fairly thunderstruck at the magnificent future I have mapped out for him.

"She has lots of money," I continue, "and like me, you will be able to settle down into quiet respectability."

"What a splendid idea," he says. "How admirably you have planned everything! You are a marvel!"

"Don't waste your time in paying me compliments, my dear Jack. This is probably your last chance. No one knows better than you do

how to make love to a young girl. I noticed that you were getting on well with her last night. Keep the game up, and never leave her when you can prudently be with her. She will probably announce to Lady Gage to-day or to-morrow that her marriage is broken off. After that is done the more you are *en évidence* with her the better. Miss Vyse may possibly consult me with regard to you, and this time I won't give you a very bad character."

"I know what to do," says Jack. "There is no one here except Frank Fairfield and Lady Gage who knows anything against me, and neither of them is likely to say anything. Frank is the least mischief-making person in the world, and I have persuaded Lady G. that I have become a very white sheep."

"So much the better. Now, my dear Jack, be off at once. There is nothing more we need say at present; and when it becomes necessary, I can easily find another opportunity of having another conference with you."

"Stop one moment," says Jack. "Suppose Miss Vyse will have nothing to say to me, which is highly probable after the facer she has just had. Suppose for some reason or the other, I cannot pull off this *coup*, what am I to get for assisting you?"

"How like that is of you, Jack! You were always so unselfish."

"I think that we're pretty well matched," he answers.

"Well, Jack, if you fail (which, by the way, you can only do by crass idiotcy), I will get three thousand pounds out of Algy Balfour after I have married him, and you shall have it from time to time as I can manage it."

"Make it five thou.," says Jack, "and I will go in heart and soul."

"You ought not to require much incentive with the prospect of marrying an heiress like Miss Vyse. However I will do as you say, and make it five thousand."

"How shall I be sure that you will give in to me?" says practical Jack.

"You would make it pretty warm for me if I did not," is my answer.

Jack, apparently well satisfied, slowly returns to the house, followed at some considerable distance by his fellow-plotter.

I manage to get back entirely unobserved, and go in to breakfast. All the men are extremely civil to me, and at least three of them in love with me; so if I had not a better game on, I might have a very good time of it. As it is, I don't intend to let my visit here be entirely fruitless. Whenever he has an opportunity poor Sir Thomas throws affectionate glances in my direction, but hitherto I have not thought it wise to give him any encouragement. This afternoon, however, I happen to be in the conservatory when Sir Thomas comes in and sits down next to me.

"I have noticed you a good deal to-day, Mrs. Despard," he says, "and you seemed to have something on your mind. You are not looking so well as you did at Ostend. Pray regard me as an old friend, and if I can possibly do anything to relieve any anxiety that you may be suffering, tell me, I beg."

"I am a little worried, dear Sir Thomas, but I could not possibly ask you to help me."

"Oh, if only you would!" says Sir Thomas, giving me an unutterable glance.

It is now or never, and I risk it.

"Well, Sir Thomas, since you must know, I was foolish enough to be persuaded to embark two thousand in a speculation that has turned out badly, and I fear that I have lost my money. I am much pressed at the moment for five hundred pounds, and as my man of business is abroad and my bankers most unaccommodating, I don't know which way to turn."

"How glad I am that you have confided in me, dearest Mrs.

Despard," replies Sir Thomas, squeezing my hand. "I will go and write you a cheque at once. You can pay me when you like or not at all." (This latter is more likely.)

Sir Thomas goes away, and returns in a few moments with a cheque made payable to bearer. I at first refuse to take it, but Sir Thomas crams it into my left hand, and seizing my right hand kisses it passionately. And then—

"Good Heaven! Sir Thomas," I say, "suppose Lady Gage was to come in?"

"There is no fear of that," he says, "she has gone out driving, and won't return for two or three hours."

Sir Thomas remains in the conservatory for half an hour, and I am now convinced that, come what may, I shall always have a true friend in this benevolent old gentleman.

CHAPTER VIII.

Miss Vyse Extinguished.

I EMBRACE the first opportunity that occurs to get Miss Vyse in a corner by herself, and to have a little quiet conversation with her.

"Have you done anything yet, my dear child, with regard to Mr. Balfour?"

"No; but I intend to write to him to-night, and break everything off."

"Upon the wisdom of that step," I say, "I shall not presume to offer any opinion; but if I were you I should be very careful what I wrote. If you like, I don't mind helping you with the letter. Come up to my room, where we shall be quite undisturbed."

"Thanks, so much," she replies; "how kind you are!" And we are soon busy concocting the epistle that is to put an end to Algy's dreams of happiness.

"Now, my dear," I commenced, "I strongly advise you not to let Mr. Balfour know what you have discovered. A man such as he deserves to be punished, and it will touch his *amour propre* much more if he thinks you are getting rid of him because you care for him no longer, than if you were doing so from a mere fit of jealousy. There is another point I wish to impress upon you, and that is, give no one down here the true reason for what has occurred. I need scarcely tell you that I don't want my name dragged into the matter."

"I will place myself entirely in your hands," she says. "I will do whatever you may think best."

"I don't mind writing the letter for you myself if you like, and you can copy it afterwards."

This is arranged, and the following is my production, which is re-written by Miss Vyse, and duly forwarded to Algy—

"*Denston Park, Bucks, Tuesday.*

"DEAR MR. BALFOUR,—I have most reluctantly come to the conclusion that we are entirely unsuited to each other. I have, therefore, decided that our engagement must not proceed any further. Nothing will alter my determination, so don't attempt to see me, or even to answer this letter.

"I have not come to this resolution without serious consideration, and, having once fixed it, am perfectly unchangeable.

"Yours truly,

"BEATRICE VYSE."

"That is plain enough," I think to myself, "and very much to the point. But it won't deter a man like Algy Balfour from coming down here to see what it really means. He must receive another crusher at the same time which will prevent his putting in an appearance at this juncture."

I accordingly seek out Frank Fairfield, to whom I say, "Frank, you are always ready to succour lovely women in distress. Are you not?"

"Well, yes; that is rather in my way," replies Frank. "What can I do for you, Lena?"

"There is nothing I want you to do for me, my dear boy. It is for Miss Vyse. The poor girl, in a moment of pique, has consented to marry Algy Balfour. She has now written to break the match off, and is terribly afraid that when he gets the letter he will come down here

and persecute her. She has confided in me, and I have promised to help her in every possible way."

"Poor little thing!" said Frank. "In what way do you suggest that I can be of any assistance?"

"Only in this," I reply. "You know Balfour very intimately, and you might easily write him a line and suggest that as the girl is really ill, and, moreover, cares for some one else, he should not worry her any more."

"Who is the lucky sportsman?" asks Frank.

"That is a little secret, my dear Frank, and I must not betray Beatrice's confidence."

"Well, it's not a sort of business in which I much care to interfere. However, as I generally do whatever I am asked, finding that it saves an infinity of trouble, I don't mind obliging you."

"Thanks, dear Frank. Then do write at once."

"Well, you must tell me what to say."

And this is what he does write—needless to add—at my dictation.

"DEAR ALGY,—I am going to write to you on a very disagreeable subject. Now, you and I were friends at Eton, and have remained so ever since. That which I should resent from most other men I should take in good part from you. I can only express a hope that this feeling is reciprocal. Now to take the plunge and get over my unpleasant task. Miss Vyse is, as you know, staying at my aunt's house, preparatory, as we all understood, to her marriage with you. The young lady has, however, confided to me the fact that she has broken the marriage off, and is, moreover, sincerely attached to some other man. She hopes that you won't worry her in any way, and I have assured her that you are most unlikely to do so. I thought it would be more honest to write and let you know exactly what has taken place. Goodbye, old chap; I am awfully sorry for you.

"Yours always,

"FRANK FAIRFIELD."

"I don't know so much about 'honest,'" says Frank. "Why, the girl has never confided in me!"

"Yes, she has," I reply, "through me. She could, of course, only do so in an indirect manner."

"All right, just as you please," he says; "you know more about these things than I do."

The letter is accordingly addressed and sealed, and leaves by the same post as Miss Vyse's *congé*.

I am not wilfully malicious, but I must say that I should like to see Algy's face when these two epistles reach him.

My next few days at Denston are very pleasant.

The Gages give a ball to which half the country are invited; and as I meet one or two amusing people, and have no unpleasant *rencontres*, I have nothing to complain of.

I have not seen a great deal of Lady Damer since I have been here, but she still continues most charming and kind in her manner towards me, and has always a civil word to say to me whenever we come across each other.

On the night of the ball she takes an opportunity of speaking to me, and from what she says I am at last enabled to gather the real reason of her outburst of affection.

"Dearest Lena," she commences, "you are one of the very few friends in whom I can thoroughly rely, and you are peculiarly well qualified to assist me in my present emergency."

"Go on, dearest," I reply, "I should be indeed ungrateful if, after all your kindness to me, I did not go from here to the end of the world to serve you."

"Ah, dear," she continues, "it is about Bois Crevé. I cannot myself understand my wild infatuation for that man, but that it exists is to me an unhappy truth. He was desperately angry with me at

Ostend when he found out, or rather guessed, that my stupid jealousy had been the cause of your leaving so hurriedly."

"Is there anything I can put right?" I say.

"That's just where it is," she answers; "you can help me amazingly if you like. Bois Crevé and I patched up our row pretty well at the end, and in fact we left at the same time. He is shortly to return to the Belgian Legation, and is probably now in town. Now, when we go back, I want you, darling, to be so kind as to invite him to lunch or dine at Curzon Street, and to ask me at the same time."

"Of course I will do it," I say.

"There will be a double advantage in this plan," she goes on; "in the first place, he is certain to come, which is extremely problematical if I were to ask him, and, secondly, it will be much safer for me, as I am daily expecting Lord Damer to return."

"Consider it done, my dear; I will arrange it directly we get to town."

"I would not ask you, Lena, if I thought that you cared the least bit about him yourself."

"Good Heavens! Augusta, you must know that to me he is absolutely indifferent."

And with a profusion of thanks on Lady Damer's part, we separate.

So I am to act as a decoy for her ladyship! It is not an amusing *rôle*, nor in this case a particularly profitable one, but still it is very essential that I should keep in with Augusta, and so I shall certainly do all she asks.

As for Bois Crevé, if I ever seriously thought of him, which I very much doubt, my present game entirely absorbs all my time, and I am perfectly ready to consign him to oblivion, at any rate, for the present.

I wonder how Algy will take his *congé*. After Frank's letter, he will surely be too proud to come down here. All this, however, I have

had to risk, but I feel the utmost confidence in the ultimate success of my scheme. After all I have planned and plotted it would be too cruel to be settled at the eleventh hour. No, that can never be!

On coming down to breakfast on the morning after the ball, I find among my letters one from Algy Balfour, and which has been re-directed from Curzon-street. Hardened as I am, I cannot help my heart beating as I tear the envelope open.

Hurrah! I think that I have now won the game. This is what Algy says:—

"DEAREST MRS. DESPARD,—I called on you at Curzon Street to-day, but was told that you had left town, and your servant declined to give me your address, although she promised to forward any letter.

"What are you going to do this winter? I am off to Paris to-morrow, and in a week or two am going on to Monte Carlo. Why not come down there about the same time? When I saw you last you led me to believe that you were bothered for money. If you take this trip you must let me act as your banker. And if you would do me a great favour, it would be to let me send you a cheque to square those duns that you were talking about. What does the amount come to? Shall I send you a thousand to keep some of them quiet? Kind love,

"Ever yours sincerely,

"ALGY BALFOUR.

"P.S.—So sorry not to have seen you the other night. We had great sport."

Great Heavens! Did any one ever experience such magnificent luck as I have had lately? My mind is made up in an instant. I seek Lady Gage the moment after breakfast, and say, "Dear Lady Gage, I am grieved to tell you that I must leave you immediately. I

have received the most distressing news this morning. A very dear friend is dangerously ill, and I must go over to Paris to nurse her."

"Under those circumstances," replied Lady Gage, "I could not think of pressing you to remain. You are really one of the best and most unselfish of women. Pray let me know when you return to England. You will always be welcome here."

I tell Jack my good news,—or at least part of it.

"Go in and win," he says, "you are sure to do the trick. I am not making particularly rapid progress here, but perhaps it will be all right in my case also."

"I am sure it will," is my answer. "Miss Vyse and I had a long talk about you last night. She is already interested, and that is half the battle with a woman. I told her that, like herself, you had suffered much, and she sympathizes with you, I am sure. Before you leave Denston you had better propose. However, you will be in a position to judge best of your own game."

"Good-bye, Lena," says Jack, "I will let you know how I get on. By the way, can you lend me fifty to carry on with?"

"I have scarcely a sou left, but if twenty-five is any good I will give you a cheque."

"Thanks," he says, "that is better than nothing."

At four o'clock in the afternoon, leaving behind me the kindly feelings of every man, woman, and child at Denston Park, I am on my way to London, and fully determined to be successful in my coming campaign.

* * * * * *

Curzon Street, Mayfair, November.

I reached home without adventures, and, needless to say, found everything in a state of chaos in consequence of my unexpected arrival. I say "unexpected," for although I took the trouble to wire from Denston, I found my telegram lying unopened on the hall table. All

the servants were out with the exception of the page boy, who had been left in charge. Where they had gone to or when they would return he either did not know, or would not tell. At any rate, I was unable to glean any information from him. I mentally registered a vow to discharge them all in the morning, and as I am probably going away for some time, they have furnished me with an excellent excuse for getting rid of them. After changing my travelling dress and having a siesta, I took Félicie to the Bristol, where they gave us a really very good dinner.

On my return home I replied to Algy's letter, and said:—

"*Curzon Street, Thursday.*

"DEAR MR. BALFOUR,—Many thanks for your letter. I was so very glad to hear from you. It is most generous of you offering to assist me in the way you have done, but I really don't know whether I ought to take advantage of your good nature. At all events come and see me. I have just returned to town, and shall be at home to-morrow and Saturday at five.

"As for Monte Carlo, I was already thinking of starting for the south, but had not made up my mind whether to stay there or at Nice. You have almost decided me, and I think I shall make my headquarters at Monte Carlo. It will be great fun being there at the same time.

"With kindest regards,

"Believe me, very sincerely yours,

"LENA DESPARD.

"P.S.—What will your *fiancée* say to your thus suddenly taking flight?"

The next morning, having given a month's warning to the housemaid and cook, who never returned until about two a.m., needless to say, horrified at my sudden advent, I sally forth, and call first on my dressmaker. She receives me somewhat coldly, and appears strangely

uncomfortable when I tell her that I require three or four dresses with as little delay as possible. I soon change all this when I say, "Your account is rather higher than I care to let it remain. I think I will write you a cheque to go on with for a hundred and fifty pounds."

It is astonishing what a change in Madame Elaine's manner this little speech creates.

"Madame is too amiable; there is no occasion for madame to put herself out in the least;" and the rest of the hateful cant that one is generally favoured with under similar circumstances. Elaine, however, does not require much pressing, and, thanks to dear Sir Thomas, I am able to give her a cheque for the amount I have proposed to her.

Leaving Elaine, I go to each of my most pressing creditors, and administer a sop to every one of them; and, in the majority of cases, I give a fresh order, which is accepted with effusion. How delightful it will be not to be dunned during the few days I remain in London!

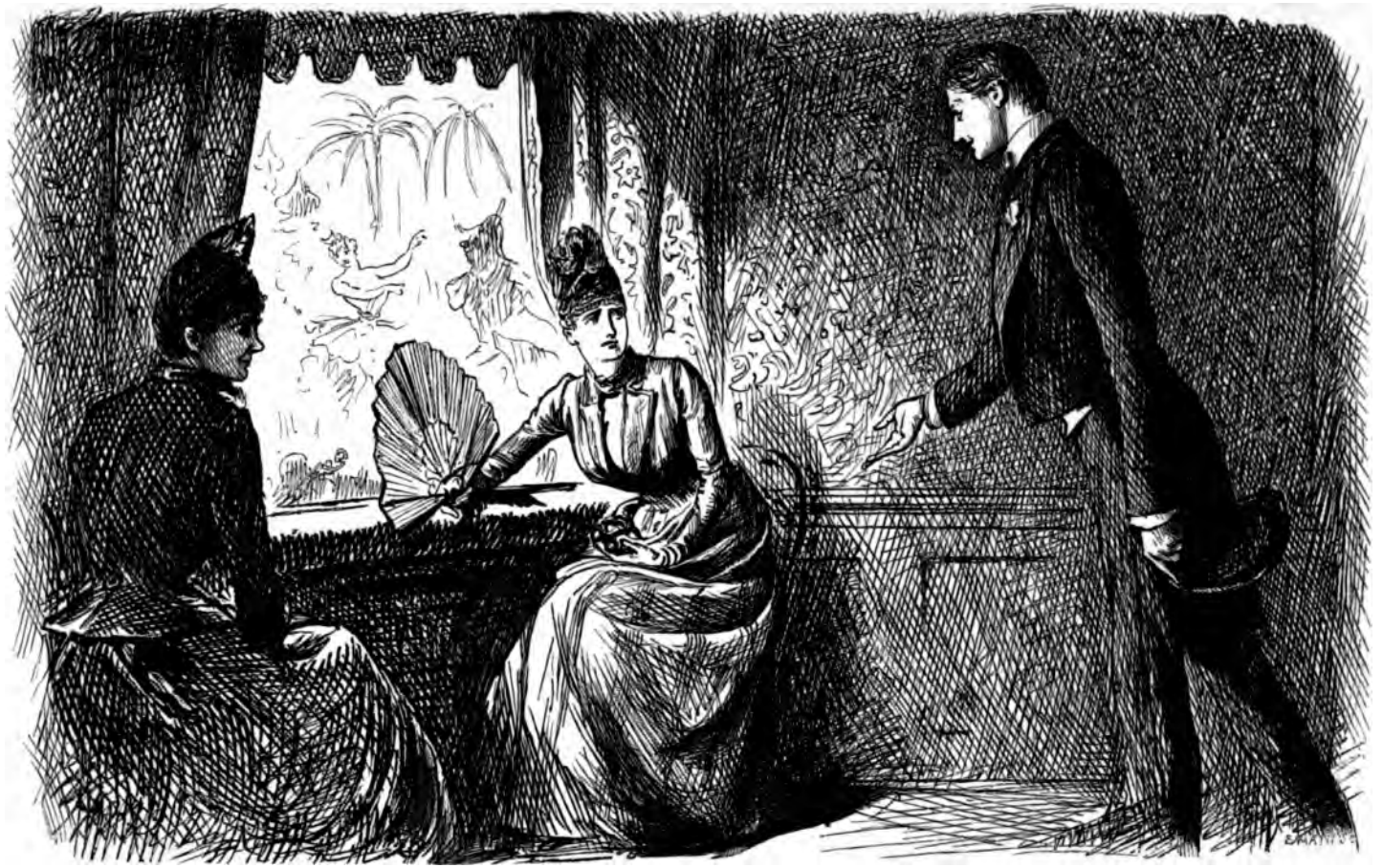
Five o'clock has scarcely sounded when Algy is announced. I have taken care to leave word that I am at home to no one else, so that there is happily no fear of our being disturbed.

From Mr. Balfour's appearance I should gather that he has been having rather a bad time of it these last few days. He looks ten years older, and is so shaky that I am sure he cannot have been to bed for three or four nights, and has probably been keeping himself up with unlimited brandies and soda. Altogether, there is a very deplorable change in this smart young man which will not do at all, and which I must speedily rectify.

Algy seems very glad to see me, and naturally I am as amiable to him as I possibly can be.

"I am so delighted that you have come back, Mrs. Despard. Where on earth have you been? I could get nothing out of your servants."

"I am glad that at any rate they possess the quality of discretion,"



"Whoever would have dreamt of such luck as this?" cried the visitor. "I hadn't the least idea you were in Paris."

I say. "They certainly have very few other good points. Where have I been? Why, to Yorkshire, of all places, and to a remote village about twenty miles from a railway. I have a great-aunt living there, and as she is extremely rich, and is likely to leave me all her money, it would be unwise not to cultivate her sometimes."

I may say, *par parenthèse*, that I am not on speaking terms with my aunt, and that she threatened to disinherit her favourite nephew for mentioning my name in her presence.

"Well, what do you say to my proposition?"

"It is too sweet of you to take compassion on my loneliness, and I accept. But what will Miss Vyse say?"

"It is all over between us," says Algy, "and kindly don't refer to it any more. It is a most disagreeable subject, and I don't want to discuss it."

"Of course," I reply, "I will never mention it again. When are you going abroad?"

"I am going to-morrow morning," he says. "I shall not stop in Paris, but shall go straight on to Monte Carlo. When can you start?"

"At the beginning of next week. However, I must really stop a day or two in Paris, for I am not strong enough to bear the through journey, and I have some shopping to do."

"Very well," he says; "write to me at the Hotel de Paris, and I will take your rooms; and, Mrs. Despard, I brought you that little cheque——No, you must really take it. Good-bye," and before I can stammer out a word of remonstrance or of thanks Algy has gone.

Yes, there it is sure enough, a cheque on Coutts for a thousand pounds. How positively delightful! It is years since I had so much money at once. Two hundred left of Sir Thomas's five and now this thousand!

On Monday, having sent off the servants with a month's wages, and installed a policeman and his wife as caretakers of the house,

Félicie and I start for Paris. Thank Heavens! we have a very calm passage, and I have never felt the journey less. We descend at the Hotel Marsollier, a very comfortable little hotel near the Bouffes Theatre, where I always go when I want to be particularly quiet or have any special game to play. The proprietor and his wife are devoted to me; they are always enchanted to see me and wait upon me, hand and foot.

My chance in life has now arrived. I must make no false step, and I have grossly exaggerated my powers if I do not return to England the promised wife of Algy Balfour.

CHAPTER IX.

Lord Udolpho.

Les places nouvellement fortifiées sont généralement les plus difficiles à prendre.

Paris, Hôtel Marsollier, November.

TRAVEL by night and save a day in Paris, or travel by day and save your complexion and your beauty sleep? Ten years ago I should have taken the night mail. An extra day in Paris! It means so much. Society and its nocturnal pleasures we have always with us; a theatre or a ball-room is much the same everywhere; but the joys of the Rue de la Paix, the subtle intoxication of Parisian shopping, are only to be appreciated between sunrise and sunset—*i.e.*, between 12.30 and 5 p.m.

On the other hand, the most sumptuous Pullman car, the downiest *coupé lit*, have nothing to offer in comparison with the balm of a real good straight sleep in a veritable Christian bed. It is a parody of rest—an imitation of comfort that you have enjoyed; and, even after a bath and a second toilette at the hotel, you feel as if you had been spending the night in some unholy revelry, and you look—a fright!

For which good and sufficient reasons, it was the *service de jour* which landed me here yesterday evening; and, in less than an hour after little Demay, the very pearl of hotel managers, had welcomed me back to the Hôtel Marsollier, I was sipping my soup (and a glass or so of dry sherry) in my particular suite of rooms, and listening to the respectful gossip of "Monsieur" Camille, who, although a head-waiter,

and therefore a personage, insisted upon serving my tiny dinner with his own august hands.

To "make unto myself friends with the mammon of unrighteousness" has always seemed to me the most obvious, and, withal, the easiest way of getting through life; and so, without the slightest intention of disparaging friend Camille's moral character thereby, I have always looked upon him as one of the many incarnations of the Unrighteous Mammon, and treated him accordingly. With the not altogether unnatural results that he attends to my wants as he would to those of very few duchesses, and prophesies, in the discreetest language, but with the most unmistakable conviction, that I have a great future before me.

"*Votre dame ira loin, Mamzelle Félicie,*" I have heard him say; "*elle arrivera!*"

Once he forgot himself in my presence. He appeared to announce dinner. "*Madame la Princesse est servie!*" he said. And then, "*Pardon, Madame; c'est plus fort que moi, mais—j'anticipe.*"

And I was not so very angry with him.

But I am sorry that I listened to him last night. I had dined leisurely and delicately. I had disposed of my café noir, my cigarette, my chartreuse; and I had quite shaken off the fatigue of the journey. Feeling that bed was out of question under the circumstances, and very much averse to spending the evening by myself, I rang the bell and asked Camille where I had better wend my way in search of a pleasant half hour. Hearing from him that a new ballet, *Les Orientales*, had just been produced at the Eden Theatre; that it was rather naughty, and therefore a big success; and that if I took a box and wore a veil, I should quite certainly see the performance without being seen—I made up my mind to risk it, and in half an hour had taken my seat behind the curtain of an *avant scène* in high glee at the thought that I was transgressing my own rules, and, as it were, defying myself. Besides, it was

Camille's fault. I never should have known of the existence of such a place if it had not been for him; at least, not—officially!

The ballet certainly *was* rather naughty; "*les Orientales*" were very pretty, and you could see a good deal of them.

But what is the use of being an old married woman if you can't go to *les petits théâtres?*

Just as I was proving to my own entire satisfaction the perfect propriety of my visit to the theatre, there was a knock at the door.

"*Entrez!*" I said, thinking it was the *ouvreuse.*

But it was no *ouvreuse* who made her appearance.

It was a Man. A male man; a fair man; a tall man; a young man; a gentleman. ("I knew he was a gentleman, because he wore dress clothes," said the waiter to the cook.)

"Whoever would have dreamt of such luck as this?" cried the visitor; "I hadn't the least idea you were in Paris. How are you? But I needn't ask; you are looking glorious, simply glorious! And how's Jack, dear old Jack? Is he in Paris, too?"

I was at first too dazed by the volubility of the intruder and the effusion with which he seized upon my hand and nearly shook it off, to point out to him the fact that I did not know him from Adam; but at the mention of Jack's name (there is but *one* Jack of *his* sort in existence, I know), I woke to the consciousness of my position.

"Leave my box, immediately!" I exclaimed, with an emotion which was nearly as much alarm as indignation; "you *must* see by this time that you do not know me—that you have made a mistake!"

"Oh, dear no!" coolly replied the young man, "I have met you with Jack Fortinbras once or twice; and as you are so intimate with him, and I am his best friend, we know each other of course. Come now, don't be cruel. I saw you boring yourself horribly; here's my card—Lord Udolpho Daysey—you know Dolly Daysey well enough, if you will only try to remember."

During this calm speech milord had taken a chair, and in an easy attitude, with one leg cocked over the other, he was laughing out his impertinences in one of the most melodious voices I have ever heard. Félicie had risen on his entrance, and, behind him, kept telegraphing to me a request for permission to summon one of the attendants. But I took no notice of her praiseworthy eagerness to rid me of this ruffian.

Doubtless, Lord Udolpho Daysey was insulting me.

Doubtless, to allow him to remain a moment longer than was absolutely necessary was a tacit admission of his right to be free and easy with me.

Doubtless, to give him any—the slightest—hold upon me was about the most idiotic thing a woman could well do who had only just regained some footing in society.

But his voice was pleasant, so mellow, so—so young. And he was tall and strong-looking, and I admire strength. And he had blue eyes—dark blue eyes—and I like dark blue eyes. And—well, there is nothing more to say, except that, for all his insolence, I was sorry to have to turn him out; because, after all, I was alone, and not too gay, and it would have been a pleasant change to listen for an hour or so to a good-looking young man's nonsense, after the doses of wisdom to which I have lately been treated, and the oceans of platitudes in which I have lately been floundering.

"I am sorry to have to remind you," I said, after a moment's pause, with as much dignity as I could command, "that I have just requested you to leave this box."

"But I assure you——" he began, nothing disconcerted.

"You have made one mistake already," I interrupted, "in attempting to force your acquaintance upon a lady who does not know you. Let me advise you not to make a second mistake—that of compelling me to summon the officials."

"Ah," he laughed, with the confidence of a man who is assured of

his game; "you won't do *that!* Come, you go about with Fortinbras; and I may say without conceit that my presence in your society could not possibly be one quarter as detrimental to your reputation as his!"

This was getting serious. I rose and faced him.

"I beg you to understand," I said, "that you have not the slightest right to act as you are doing. I presume you call yourself a gentleman. Again I request you to go."

He does not move. He is still gazing up in my face with the same look of easy, gentlemanly impertinence, but this time there is a fire in his gaze that I had not noticed before.

"You are talking to me very severely," he said, "but all the time your eyes are belying your words. Why, they are positively dancing with fun! Come, you know that you would give anything to burst out laughing, and say, 'Well, Dolly, you are as cheeky as ever; but you may take me to supper at the Café Anglais if you like.'"

He should not have said that. And yet he looked so handsome in the saying of it, that it was all I could do to give Félicie the signal she had been waiting for all the time.

"Sir!" I cried; and then, "Félicie, *Appelez!*"

She hurried out of the box. I moved towards the door, but my persecutor interposed his stalwart figure, and, with an entire alteration in his bearing, laid his hand detainingly on my arm, and spoke in a rough whisper—

"I shall go, of course," he murmured. "But, madame, if I *have* made a mistake, tell me so before I go, *on your honour!* Did I not see you, when I was dining at Kettner's, in Soho, go up to a *cabinet particulier* with Captain Fortinbras? Did I not see you (not so very long ago) at the Albany, and were you not coming out of Captain Fortinbras' rooms? If it *is* so, I don't think you need be so cruel to me. I mean you no disrespect, on my word. I only wanted to

help you if possible to spend a pleasant evening. I was boring myself. You were alone. And you are *very* lovely——!"

He breaks off, and, after a moment, resumes:—

"If, on the other hand, I have made a mistake, all I can say is—forgive me!"

At this point Félicie returns triumphantly with one of the higher officials.

"*Madame se plaint de——?*" he inquires politely.

I am fixing the young Englishman with a gaze into which I try to infuse a combination of *hauteur*, aversion, and amused contempt.

His eyes sparkle, so I suppose that I succeed.

I turn to the official, and I inform him that I wish my carriage to be called at once; that I have sent three or four times for it—in fact everything that is not.

He "confounds himself in excuses," and begs us to follow him.

Going, I dart a last glance at my ruffian.

My ruffian stands aside, with uncovered head, and whispers, "*Will* you forgive me?"

And, passing him, my lips shape the words, "I forgive you."

Shaking the dust off my feet (I speak in metaphor) upon the crowded theatre, the noisy orchestra, the blazing gas, and the unabashed comeliness of Lord Udolpho Daysey, I enter the neat little *coupé* that Demay can always produce at a moment's notice "for a consideration," and go my way rejoicing.

I may here remark, as a parenthesis, that the Parisian hotel-keeper is a wonderful man. Not because he will get you anything you may want, as long as he knows you can pay for it, for it is not only in Paris that money is able to work wonders. But because he is never at fault; he will never confess himself to be beaten; he will always take your orders with effusive obsequiousness, however absurd or impossible they may be, and although he knows it will take him all

his time to invent an excuse for their non-fulfilment. As for Demay, I am very sure that if I were to express a desire to promenade myself to-morrow in the Bois on a white elephant, or to partake of boiled ostrich for dinner, he would make a note of it with the sweetest smile and most demure face in the world.

And to-morrow, if I were to express dissatisfaction at not being supplied with what I had ordered, he would say, "Ah, madame, I am desolate of not to be able to execute your honoured order. But, *que voulez-vous?* Madame knows as well as myself that the ostrich is not eatable until the 1st of April!"

Or again: "Madame could not have been aware that since madame was at Paris the ladies of the *demi-monde* have adopted the mode of the white elephant for the promenade to the Bois. Naturally *le grand pschutt* has taken white elephants in disgust. I have therefore commanded a victoria of the most *chic* for the use of madame."

Which brings me back to my brougham. Félicie is driving back with me, as is usual when I go alone to the theatre.

But to-night she is strangely taciturn.

Like most French servants, and all confidential ones, she generally avails herself to the full of the freedom of speech allowed to her class. Under other circumstances, she would be chattering nineteen to the dozen about the performance, the performers, and the female shortcomings and male excellences of the audience. But to-night she is mute. She is *froissée.* She is "not angry, but only so *hurt.*" She only approves of my being approached by *un monsieur sérieux;* and, as this evening's *monsieur* was distinctly not *sérieux,* she is irritated because she was not allowed to send him to the right-about in shame and confusion of face.

I, on the other hand, am not at all sorry to be left to my thoughts. Indeed, if she had commenced her chatter I should have shut her up promptly, for this adventure has moved me not a little.

In the first place, I scent danger therein. It is just as likely as not that Lord Udolpho Daysey is on his way to Monaco. And although he *is* such a young reprobate, he is nevertheless in the best society. The son of a Duke of Meddose must be bad indeed to lose caste. If he were to meet Algy Balfour, and make his acquaintance? Perhaps they already know each other. It would take a lot of explanation to satisfy Algy that milord had *not* seen me dine with Jack in Soho, that he had *not* seen me at Jack's rooms, that he had *not*, on the strength of that, come round to my box at the Eden, and claimed acquaintance with me, while I was looking on at a ballet of more than questionable morality. It certainly would not *increase* any inclination Mr. Balfour may have to make me his wife. It might *decrease* it considerably.

Secondly, I am agitated by the discovery that it is not with fear alone that my heart is beating so fast. To you, O "dere diry," I will confide the truth. It is years since any man's face has had any attraction (in particular, be it said) for Lena Despard. Once or twice—more perhaps—has she had a *toquade* in her life. But never has any face so "fetched" her at first sight.

You, my faithful gossip, will not misunderstand me. I am not hinting at *love* at first sight. *A d'autres!* you will say. No, I say it seriously, it is not *love*. I know what love is. I *have* been in love, worse luck! Worldly as I am now, I have had my Great Passion. But the features that I came to love did not take my fancy all at once. My first conversation with the man who became my idol left me as indifferent to him as before I knew him. I experienced no desire to meet him again, no curiosity as to his occupations, his real nature, his feelings towards me.

But this boy, this young wretch of a Dolly, interests me unaccountably—interested me from the moment he appeared in the open doorway, from the moment his blue eyes met mine. Very probably he is laughing over his escapade even now with his boon companions,

worse than himself; very probably he does not care a snap of his strong fingers whether he ever sees me again; very probably, if he does, he will get me into trouble and consider that a better joke still; but it can't be helped and it can't be denied, I *should* like to see him again; I should, I should, I *should!*

I am so deadly sick of the men of the world, who have always surrounded me, of the *roué* and the respectable, of the rich and poor, of the married and single—of all alike! And the few boys who have ventured to pay me their homage, whom in a word I have not frightened into silence or flight, have been so brainless, so nervous, and such bores, that, for all their good looks, I was never able to endure them.

But he, this abominable Dolly (there—I swear I shall hate him in a minute!) is such a refreshing contrast, that I should like him to get to know me—properly. He is a charming combination of youth and manliness, of *entreprenant* boyhood and innocent *dévergondage.* I have heard men describe women whose virtue belied their looks as "a Diana-Venus." As this is in every way an apposite case, I think I must call Dolly "a Mars-Adonis."

Ah, my dear child! How your pen does run away with you, to be sure! But your pen is the only thing that shall have the chance of running away with you *now.* You are going to marry Algy Balfour.

All the same, I *should* like Dolly to take it into his curly head to ask somebody decent, who really knows me, to introduce him.

Tout est dit! I have said my say about him. Dolly shall appear no more until he is properly introduced.

We arrive at the hotel, and come to a sudden stop with a clash and a rattle.

I wend my leisurely way to my rooms *au premier,* and Félicie remains behind to collect my belongings.

Presently she makes her appearance, her face pregnant with news. I look at her inquiringly.

"*Oui, madame,*" she says, (as if I could still be thinking of the man!) "*Il nous a suivi!*"

"Followed us?" I retort sharply. "He? Who?"

"Why, madame, *cette espèce de type* who did introduce himself into the box of madame."

"Oh, indeed!" I say in my calmest tones. "What a very dangerous young man! Never mind, Félicie; I don't suppose he will eat us. Besides, if he did follow us? What then? More fool he. Now, ring the bell, and let us have some supper. I am simply famished."

Félicie obeys, and helps me on with my slippers and wrapper, still full of her grudge against *him.*

"But that is not all," she resumes at length. "This gentleman, I have seen him, from the top of the stairs, come into the hotel and speak to Monsieur Camille."

"In that case," I laugh merrily, "I have no doubt that Camille has sent him about his business long ago. Don't be so silly, Félicie; I have laughed quite enough for one evening, I am sure."

But then my supper comes in and with it Camille. He, too, has evidently something to say; but it is a something that tickles his fancy.

As soon as he has ministered unto me to his satisfaction, he, too, takes up his parable.

"Madame has made another conquest," he murmurs, as he fills my glass. "A gentleman—English—*un monsieur très comme il faut*" —(this, probably under the influence of a handsome tip)—"comes for to ask me the name of madame. He say that he have been presented to madame in the time, but that the name have escape him."

"And what did you say?" I inquire, with much indifference.

"I could have refuse," grins Camille, "but to make him pleasure—he was *très, très comme il faut*—I say to him that madame calls herself Robinsonne, that madame is the wife of the new Bishop Anglican—

une blague, faites excuse! and he go away in grumbling between the teeth."

I laugh, as in duty bound, and Camille retires obviously delighted with himself. But I am laughing on the wrong side of my mouth. Things were bad before, but this is worse. Camille is an idiot!

Worse and worse! Dolly Daysey has it now in his power to add to his other scraps of information about me the very suspicious fact that I have been staying at the Hôtel Marsollier under a false name, that I have been passing myself off as Mrs. Robinson, wife of an English Bishop. Why! that would be enough to convict any woman of all sorts of wickedness! Mrs. Robinson would be bad enough; but to pretend to be a Bishopess points at once to some necessity for assuming a claim of respectability which one does not possess.

And I who am on the high road to rehabilitating the name of Despard! I who will have to be married under that name! If Algy thought I was ashamed of it——! But no more of this. Let me to bed.

Next morning I wake unrefreshed. Wake, that is to say, for about the fiftieth time since I tried to go to sleep.

A wretched night I have had. A night full of a jumble of thoughts, a jumble of dreams. A night wherein I have seen Dolly the principal dancer amid a bevy of laughing *coryphées*, wherein Jack has torn me forcibly from the altar to which Algy had just led me; wherein Félicie and Camille have done the honours of Sir Thomas Gage's house in consequence of the premature death of the late proprietor and their unexpected succession to the title and estates.

A night which has been long enough for me to look my position in the face from every point of view, to study every combination of possibilities in a way which was as exhausting as it was exhaustive, and to come to a diametrically opposite conclusion at least three times in every hour.

Félicie brings up my chocolate as usual at nine o'clock. "Chocolate me no chocolates!" I think, and leap out of my couch of Little-ease with a determination that I will *not* submit to the torture of my own society any longer.

I leave her to prepare my bath, and make for the salon, where I pour out for myself, and drink off nearly at a draught a pint of champagne. Then, feeling very much better, I go through my toilette, and lay my plans for the day.

What shall I do "to distract myself," as the French say? What shall I do, for instance, until four o'clock, when I can go for a drive in the Bois? First, I will write a letter or two that may be of advantage. Next, I will write my diary up to date, as there is a good deal of novel and confidential matter to be confided thereto. Then—oh, *then*, I will go the round of the *modistes;* I will steep myself in the mysteries of fashion, I will worship at the altar of the mode!

CHAPTER X.

Sir Thomas Again.

Hôtel Marsollier, Paris.

IT strikes me, "dere diry," as I look at you this morning before operating upon you, that you are getting very fat. Indeed, I might say plethoric.

I wonder if it is quite safe to gratify your appetite for confidences any further; I wonder whether I ought not to diet you, feed you with plain meats, and leave out the sauce.

Bah! I am possessed with as insatiable a longing to fill you with my secrets as you are to absorb them. And, if I should find you getting very much worse, I can always bleed you, and consign a few of your pages to the flames.

A woman, like a steam-engine, must have some sort of a safety-valve; my brain is so full of hopes and fears, of combinations and recollections, that I must have some means of unburdening it every day; and where in this wide wicked world should I find a confidant as discreet, a friend as sympathizing as you? Besides (it sounds ungrateful, but it might be necessary) I can always put an end to *your* existence; I can always "do for" *you;* I can always, as the Fenians say, "remove" *you!* While in the case of a flesh and blood confederate, such a proceeding would be, if not impossible, at all events highly improper.

I have read somewhere that a celebrated poisoner used to keep a journal, and therein to note the minutest details as to the process and

the progress in each successive crime. Such a man must have felt with each word he wrote that he was adding to the risk of discovery, and destroying his only loophole of escape. And yet he went on day by day until he was arrested.

And although your smart cover, my gossip, contains nothing more than the record of a few follies, one or two mistakes, and an occasional peccadillo, I have much the same feeling with regard to what I am now doing. I know I am doing a silly, a very silly thing; and yet I could no more abstain from telling you the truth than I could fly. It is such a relief to be able to tell the truth—now and then.

Well, yesterday morning, when I had looked you up, and put you away, I wrote a couple of letters—one to Captain Fortinbras and the other to Lady Gage. Needless to state that my letter to Jack was addressed in the manly fist which I have thought it advisable to adopt in my correspondence with him.

Here is a copy:—

"DEAR JACK,—You will be glad to hear of my safe arrival in our beloved Paris. I write you this line in great haste, as I know how *anxious* you always are about your old friend. I am staying here only a day or two, principally to do some shopping. So you had better not write to me here (if by any chance the fit should seize you), but address *Poste Restante*, Monte Carlo. How does your flirtation with Miss Vyse progress? Let me know all about it. I should be very glad to wish you joy.

"Always sincerely yours,

"LENA DESPARD.

"P.S.—I hear that a certain Lord Udolpho Daysey, a friend of yours, has conceived the ridiculous idea that I have been seen dining with you in Soho somewhere, and even calling at your chambers. I can trust you, I am sure, to undeceive him, if he should say anything to you about it."

This to Lady Gage:—

"My dear Lady Gage,—You will see by the address that I am in Paris. My poor invalid is already, I am rejoiced to say, so much better that we are able to take her to the Riviera to escape the trying English winter. We leave here in a day or two, and I am naturally very busy, doing some shopping in my small way, and calling upon a large circle of friends among the *English* community; but I cannot refrain from sending you these few words, as I know what interest you take in poor me, and as it affords me another opportunity of thanking you again and again for the *unvarying* kindness you showered upon me during my *happy* visit to dear Denston.

"Ever, my dear Lady Gage, your attached friend,

"Lena Despard.

"P.S.—There is a Mrs. Robinson staying here. She might be my twin-sister, we are so alike."

Having thus conscientiously performed my home duties, I turn my attention to the great business of life—I mean woman's life; and that, of course, is *chiffons*.

And, as I am going to invade the Holy of Holies of millinery and dressmaking, and as I shall have to undergo the scrutiny of the High Priests of those mysteries, the choice of my costume for the occasion is a matter of serious importance. After due consideration, I come to the conclusion that I cannot do better than go in for *extreme simplicity*. I am aware that, however long you may be stopping in Paris in the off-season, the best taste is to wear plain plaids or serges, as if you were merely a bird of passage from one country house to another. Moreover, I really *am* a bird of passage.

Therefore, I array myself in one of Redfern's neatest productions—a yachting-gown *qui sent son Cowes* a mile off. The simplest thing imaginable. Merely a bodice of blue serge in the shape of a swallow-tail

coat, with silver buttons, worn over a waistcoat of red, fastened up to the throat with smaller buttons of silver. The skirt has double box-pleats, the inner part of which is lined with red serge to match the waistcoat. The upper part of the skirt is all blue, and falls in cunning folds.

With it I wear a hat made of nothing but silver braid; and on my arm I carry an ulster (as it looks like rain) of dark blue cloth, the hood lined with red satin, and edged with an embroidery of mingled red and silver; collar and cuffs faced to match.

Then I get into the brougham, and start on a voyage of discovery. From the great Worth to his rival Pingat, from Félix to Mangas-Barowne, do I wander. I interview Madame Laferrière; and from Madame Maria Hamm and Madame Virot I gather new lights as to bonnets and hats. It is true that I can hardly call myself a customer of these celebrities; but I have been taken the rounds by such women as the Princesse de Drogan and the Marquise de Puitsec, and therefore I still shine, when I make my occasional appearance, with the reflected light of their glory. It is more particularly the male dressmaker who welcomes me. He avers that I am sympathetic—that I am an artist—that it is a pleasure to explain one's creation to me, even although I do not purchase. *Cette chère Madame Despard!*

I feast my eyes in showrooms, where, to the subdued hum of conversation, tall, shapely damsels, the costume models, are pacing the velvety carpets in marvels of confections, with a demeanour often more aristocratic than that of the high-born ladies who are staring at them. I wend my way up broad staircases, between spreading palm and tinted dracœna, to where, *au premier*, some venerated arbiter of fashion is holding his court. Here, clad in purple velvet, his deep collar and ruffles of costly lace, the picturesque individual, who very often has dropped a title and genteel poverty to adopt a *nom de guerre* and the noble art of money-making, sits in judgment upon his fair clients, issues his edicts, and snuffs up their homage.

I venture into mysterious dépôts, where there is certainly not much stock on view, but where you can purchase false busts and false dimples, false ears and false hips, false hair and a false complexion.

And, at last, with my head full of a host of details concerning *robes chanoinesse* and Louis XV.; farthingales and aiguillettes; coats *en cœur* and Russian chemisettes; hats Girondin, Spanish amazon, Tyrolean, and Mithridates; peony *capotes* and Titian-red *cabriolets*, I get back to the brougham, and drive off to the Bois.

It is early yet, and so there are not many people to be seen. I drive straight to the Café de la Cascade, and order a nice little lunch. While it is being prepared, I go for a stroll outside, and, coming to the path that leads under the cascade, follow it until I am standing under the foaming water. For some moments I stand there lost in thought, giving way to the soothing influence of the dull roar of the torrent. Then I turn to go, and see a young couple standing a few yards off, and evidently utterly oblivious of my presence. For his arm is round her waist; they are laughing merrily, and every now and then he kisses her. They are a very ordinary young couple. She is anything but pretty, and he is decidedly not handsome. Probably it is some poor *commis* and his sweetheart; but they look very happy. I am, of course, not in the least interested in these vulgar people; but, somehow, the sight moves me strangely. They do look *so* happy!

All through lunch I cannot get rid of them. I cannot help thinking how little *I* know of happiness, how little of it *I* have ever experienced. To be loved, and to love, passionately and purely; to be able to respect the loved one, to know that he looks up to you as to a shrine. What greater happiness can there be than this?

And to think that this is a Paradise from which I am an exile, perhaps for ever!

The thought makes me sad, wretched, irritable.

I call for my bill, and go off to *faire le tour du Bois*. For the

time of year there are a good many decent people. I know a great many of the faces—by sight; but there is not a soul who bows to me or even to whom I can bow. After going the round two or three times, my temper gets the better of me, and I give in. "*A l'hôtel!*" I cry viciously to my Jehu. Accordingly to the hotel we go.

As I pass through the hall, Camille approaches me with his usual deference and a card in his hand.

"Madame," he says, "Monsieur Seer Gedge is come soon after Madame have go out; and he is here still! He is in the saloon of reading. Do I make him go up?"

I look at the card in horror.

"*Sir Thomas Gage!*"

"Sir Thomas Gage!" I murmur to myself. "What on earth has he come to Paris for? And how on earth did he find out my address?"

For unto no living soul did I confide the secret of my Paris address when I left England. As a matter of fact, I never do. Jack knows it, of course; but then he is as much at home here as I am. But he is the only exception. I do not even take into my confidence the friends I meet, the acquaintances I make in the Bois, in society, or at the Opéra. They give me their cards, with full information as to their whereabouts; but I don't return the compliment. If they express a desire to look me up, I have a stereotyped answer ready for them: "Oh, how *too* kind of you! But, unfortunately, I am staying with some abnormally quiet people—dear old friends of mine, a clergyman and his wife, but quite hermits—and so I am obliged to *entreat* everybody not to call;—it would frighten them out of their wits! But, if I *may*, I shall be *delighted* to call upon *you; may* I?" And with that, and a feeble joke about "Mahomet and the mountain, don't you know?" I have always managed to maintain the privacy of my retreat.

Respectability is a mighty thing, and one in no way to be despised. Indeed, just now I am straining every nerve to attain unto it. But,

like a heavy dinner, it surfeits you, and is depressing; and, before you indulge in it again, some interval of repose is necessary, and a tonic. Now, Paris is my tonic, and "*la vie Parisienne*" is my repose. A faded queen of society will seek rest in some remote seaside village; when society has tired *me* out, I hie me away for seclusion to the Hôtel Marsollier, and for peace of mind to the *petits théâtres.*

So it is not likely that I should often feel inclined to break my rule, and least of all in favour of any one who reminds me of the stiff and starched collar of British conventionality which I have just sent to the wash.

"How *on earth* did he find out my address?"

I have often laughed at people who, receiving a letter in an unknown hand, turn and re-turn it, inspect it sideways and upside-down, discover successive and contradictory clues in postmark, monogram, and superscription, lose themselves in a maze of conjecture as to its possible (or impossible) contents, and only open it, at last, as a sort of after-thought.

It strikes me very forcibly that I am doing much the same thing myself at the present moment. If I want to know why Sir Thomas has come over, and how he has managed to unearth me, I had better ask him.

"*Mais, certainement, Camille,*" I say, trying to look as if I had not been taken aback in the least, "*Faites monter.*"

And I sweep up-stairs to my rooms, with the undulating walk which I am told is one of my strong points, although, unfortunately, there is no one to admire it but Camille.

Even a head waiter, however, is better than nothing.

"*'Cré nom d'une pipe!*" I hear him mutter. "*Si j'étais prince du sang ou millionaire!*"

I think he means me to hear it. I pardon him, however. I grant him the benefit of extenuating circumstances. Evidently Camille is a man of taste.

I sit down without taking off my ulster. It will be a good broad hint to Sir Thomas that I am not disposed to grant him more than five minutes. Indeed, I should not have received him at all, as I more than suspect that his visit bodes me no good, if I had not been told that he has been waiting here all day. He would be quite capable of waiting here until he did see me.

"Monsieur Seer Gedge!" And Sir Thomas enters the room. As I rise to receive him, I note with surprise the change which the last few days that have elapsed since I left Denston Park have worked in his face. He has aged visibly. He is got up for the occasion—*tiré à quatre épingles*—but the well-built frockcoat does not conceal a wearier stoop in his bearing, and fresh wrinkles seem to have furrowed his clean-shaven, hollow cheeks. Even the gardenia in his button-hole has been fading sympathetically during his six hours of hope deferred. There is a dull, craving look in his eyes, and an unsteadiness in his gait, as if he had been drinking; but that, I soon find, is not the case. He looks "as if he had not been to bed all night," and that, I soon find, *is* the case.

"Oh, how do you do, Sir Thomas?" I cry effusively; "and how is dear Lady Gage? and why didn't you bring her with you?"

He does not seem to see my outstretched hand, but stands gazing at me "as if he could eat me," as the children say.

"If I had brought Lady Gage," he says, with a harsh laugh, "she would be foaming at the mouth by this time. I have been waiting for you ever since twelve o'clock."

"Dear me, how tiresome!" I exclaim; "I wish I had known you were coming, I would have left word. But why didn't you go away and call again?"

"Because I knew you were bound to come back some time or other," he answers, doggedly; "and I was afraid of missing you. You might have been off to the Riviera to-night. You might be going out

to dinner. A hundred things. So I stopped where I was, and now I've got you."

I am a good deal startled at his last words, naturally enough; but I do not notice them. *Je m'en garderais bien!* Only I do not resume my seat, and I do not invite him to sit down. There is a wildness in his manner that warns me to be on my guard.

"What a bore for you, Sir Thomas!" I say, composedly; "I hope they gave you a decent lunch, though. As a rule, the *cuisine* is rather good here."

"I have eaten nothing since I left Charing Cross last night," he answers, in a hoarse voice; "I couldn't eat. I have had some champagne and a biscuit, that's all." When a man arrives at the point of neglecting his meals, you may be sure something serious is the matter with him.

"Good gracious, Sir Thomas!" I cry, as if with a sudden apprehension; "I do hope that it is not bad news that has brought you over so suddenly. I trust that your family——"

"My family is all right," says he, roughly; "they are all as strong as horses, so you needn't alarm yourself about *them*. And, as for my pecuniary position, thank God, that never was better!"

He is evidently leading up to a point. He evidently has something of considerable importance to say to me. And, as the situation is delicate, I think it best to bring on the crisis at once.

"I left you entertaining a house-party at Denston," I say, in measured accents; "what has brought you to Paris?"

"*You!*" he blurts out; "and——"

"And how did you find out my address?" I interrupt; "I had purposely left it an open question when people asked me for it, in order to make sure of a few days' quiet."

He keeps silence a moment, and then produces something from his pocket-book.

"When I thought of the long time that must elapse before you wrote to me from Nice, and your letter reached me; when I thought how more than likely it was, surrounded as you always are, that you would forget your promise, I could stand it no longer. It seems probable that the people in charge at your place in town would know your whereabouts; that, in any case, money would induce them to know it. So I came up from town, and drove straight to Curzon Street."

"But they do *not* know it," I cry, triumphantly; "they are the last people to whom I should confide it."

"As I was standing in the hall," he continues, "while the woman had gone down-stairs to consult her husband, I saw a postcard addressed to you on the hall-table. I took it up and read it. Forgive me. I could not resist the temptation; it might give me some clue to *you*. Here it is!"

I take it from his shaking hand. It is Monsieur Demay's reply to the telegram I sent him announcing my speedy arrival, and informs me that the rooms I usually occupy at the Hôtel Marsollier are very much at my service. It must have arrived just after I left London.

"How *could* you do such a thing, Sir Thomas?" I cry, with an indignation which is not altogether feigned. "Pry into a woman's correspondence! It is not like you."

"It is *not* like me, I know," he assents, with a sigh. "I am not like myself. I have not been myself since I fell in with you at Ostend. Before I met you I was happy. Yes, happy; for to be absolutely satisfied with one's lot, and to have no desire, no ambition one cannot gratify, is to enjoy such happiness as only few men can attain. I ate, drank, slept, worked, and played, in comfort and in peace. I was held up as a model of what a country gentleman should be. I had even the reputation, in a way, of being a good man, a Christian, and now——"

I begin to feel terribly uncomfortable, but I hold my tongue. He will have done all the sooner if I don't interrupt him.

"No!" he cries, madly flinging his arms about my skirts. "No, you shall *not* go! No, you *shall* not leave me!"

"Now I am—well, what I *am*—your slave! You have fascinated me; you have metamorphosed me; you have made me drink of a cup which contains a cordial that intoxicates and a poison that tortures. Don't laugh; I *must* explain to you what I feel, and I can't find words to express it. You have taught me that it is one thing to exist, and another to live. Until last September I had existed, and I was content. Ever since I caught sight of your sweet face I have *lived*, and I am not content. When you are near me, when you speak kindly to me, even although we are surrounded by prying eyes, I am tasting a bliss which is ineffable, which I once believed only existed in the brains of poets and novelists. When you are far away, or when you are listening to the vapid nonsense of some young fop of the period, I am undergoing an agony of jealousy and longing. Lena, I can't live without you." He stops, choked with excitement.

"And was it to tell me this," I say, with deliberation, "that you have tracked me out, that you have run away from home like a truant schoolboy, although you know well enough that the escapade might irretrievably ruin my reputation? And yet you say you love me!"

"Lena, my idol!" he cries, falling upon both knees before me; "Lena, have mercy, I implore you! Love such as mine is a terrible thing enough when it comes to a young man; but when a poor fellow is past forty"—I turn my head to hide a smile; past forty, indeed!—"when he has reached middle age, and has never loved like this before, it is more, far more; it is a madness of adoration; and it can only lead him to the seventh heaven or to destruction! Ah! Lena, again I entreat you, have mercy!"

I had anticipated a scene, but this is becoming a little too dramatic. *Il faut en finir.* And so I proceed to try the effect of a cold bath.

"You really must excuse me, Sir Thomas," I say in my iciest voice; "it is getting late, and I am going out to dinner."

Instead of damping his ardour, my *douche* seems only to be casting oil upon the flame.

"No!" he cries, madly flinging his arms about my skirts. "No, you shall *not* go! No, you *shall* not leave me!"

"*Shall* not?" I repeat coldly. "That is a strong word, Sir Thomas. By what right do you presume to speak to me like that?"

"By what right?" he exclaims, springing to his feet, with flashing eyes. "By the right of my love for you, Lena. Have you forgotten the conservatory? Have you forgotten the loving words you murmured in response to the passionate cry that came from my very soul? Have you forgotten the kiss you gave me while my lips were burning upon yours?"

"No, I have not forgotten!" I say wildly, in sudden wrath at the recollection; "nor have I forgotten it was *there*, in that conservatory, that I confided to you the secret of my pecuniary difficulties. But, if you imagine that, when you signed the cheque that relieved my necessities, you purchased the right to insult me, you are vastly mistaken! Thank goodness! I have been able to recover some of the money I have lost, and I can now repay what you lent me!"

I hurry to the escritoire, and begin fumbling among my papers—too angry to remember that I may be about to alienate him for ever, and that he is at present the best friend I have in the world. For Algy Balfour is a young man, and, therefore, like all young men, slippery.

But Sir Thomas has followed me, and is clutching each of my wrists in his strong grip. My ebullition of anger seems to have quieted him down.

"Lena, you will drive me mad!" he says, but in a calm voice. "Think for a moment. I am a gentleman, and so I *could* not, by any possibility, have had such a thought in my mind. Come, now, let me forget what you said. Let me tell you what my real object was in seeking you out."

I suffer him to lead me to a chair. He sits down himself.

"My estate is entailed, I needn't say," he begins; "but Lady Gage is amply provided for, and the personalty is my own absolutely to do what I like with. The personalty brings me in £11,000 a year. Now, I have come to Paris, to ask you to share that with me. We will live where you please. If I die first, you will have £11,000 a year. If Lady Gage dies first, I will marry you. We are childless, as you know. Therefore, if you bore me a son after marriage, he would succeed to the title."

There is a long silence.

"Lena!" he falters; "Lena, my angel! Will you?"

A sudden idea strikes me. A way to get rid of him, and be alone with my thoughts.

"If you will go back to England," I say, "not to-morrow, but to-night—this very instant, I will write to you. If you don't, I will never speak to you again!"

He rises almost before my voice dies away, raises my hand to his lips, takes up hat and stick, and reaches the door.

"Good-bye, Lena!" And he is gone.

I shall leave Paris to-morrow.

CHAPTER XI.

En Voyage.

Hôtel de Paris, Monte Carlo.

I OPEN your leaves, "dere diry," in rather a different atmosphere from that in which I last communicated to you my sayings and doings. They have put me into a charming *appartement au second* in the east angle of the hotel, that is, with some of the windows looking on the north, the gay *place*, and the distant Alps, and the rest opening out a vista of villa-dotted coast, felucca-studded bay, and open Mediterranean. The air is very balmy, my room is redolent of violets, and my windows are all wide open.

I attack my subject to-day, "dere diry," in rather a different frame of mind to that in which I last confided to you my worries. Then I was still chafing under the annoyance which the successive episodes of "Lord Udolpho Daysey's Dream" and "The Bad Baronet's Bathos" had inflicted upon me. Then I was feeling persecuted, hunted down, *déclassée.* Now "my foot is on my native heath," my position is unassailable (for Algy Balfour is staying within easy reach), and I am as merry as a cricket.

For a good half-hour after Sir Thomas Gage left me that evening I sat motionless, in deep thought. Needless to particularize the subject of my thoughts. I was weighing probabilities against possibilities, and I concluded by determining to—well, let things slide!

C'est tout dire.

Then, finding that I was no further advanced than when I began my cogitations, I rang the bell, sent for a box at the Variétés, ordered dinner, and proceeded to make an elaborate toilette.

After dinner I felt better. I always do. It sounds carnal to a degree, and gluttonous to a fault; but it is true.

Le temps de fumer une cigarette; and Mrs. Despard lounges down to her brougham, and is whisked off to the Boulevard des Italiens. The piece is a new one; a farcical comedy in three acts, rather wittier, rather less boisterous, rather more *risqué* than its predecessors. It is called *Les Onze Mille Vierges de Paris.* As for the plot, the less said the better, perhaps. Suffice it that I am thoroughly amused, and go to bed in a good temper.

My visit to the theatre, however, reminds me irresistibly of a story Jack once told me. He was staying at the Grand while *Niniche* was on. Of course he went to see it, and to his surprise saw, moreover, a British matron "of the straitest sect of the Pharisees" enjoying it hugely—a woman who sometimes sat next him at dinner, and was constantly airing her French. "How did you like *Niniche?*" he asked her next morning. "Like it? I couldn't understand what it was all about," replied she. "But you speak French like a native!" "Ah, yes! the French of Racine and Fénelon, perhaps; but I never understand French *when I go to the Variétés!*"

I sleep the sleep of the just from "dewy eve till morn!" and then I send off Félicie to the Rue Scribe to secure me a *wagon-lit* for my journey south.

The day passes somehow—how do such days always pass? I stroll out to buy a few things. I lunch. I go out for a drive in the victoria, and leave a few cards. I take occasional, and wholly unnecessary, note of the packing; whatever Félicie may be, whatever other cause of complaint I may have against her, I need not trouble my head about the packing; it is her forte, and she never forgets anything nor puts anything in the wrong place.

As I stand over her, she heaves a deep sigh.

"What's the matter, Félicie?" I inquire.

"Ah, madame!"—with another portentous sigh—"I cannot help it. It is stronger than me. *Ce brave homme!* So pale! so drawn! He has lost his ribs with fatigue! How he loves you, that one!"

"Loves me?" I repeat, sharply. "What are you talking about, Félicie? What one?"

"But that poor Seer Thomas, *pardi!*" returns she; "and he is not so very old, see you? A gentlemen *très comme il faut;* but very, *very* much as it should be. What a disaster that he should be already married!"

The "*très comme il faut*" reminds me of Camille and Lord Udolpho. Besides, this is not the first time that Félicie has chanted the praises of Sir Thomas. She evidently considers *him*, at least, *un homme sérieux;* and she never raises a man to that proud pinnacle in her estimation, however serious his intentions may be toward her mistress, without having previously subjected his generosity to a practical test.

So Sir Thomas has been "getting at" Félicie? Much good may it do him! By this time three months I hope to be Mrs. Balfour of Balfour, and having been thus duly whitewashed and provided with an undeniable character, I can begin a new life; I can dispense with the assistance of old fogies like Sir Thomas, and the social countenance of senile tract-distributors like Lady Gage; I can—bah, what can I *not* do?

Five o'clock has struck; and, with it, for the last time (perhaps the very last, as I fear he knows too well) Camille brings in the lamp. Now for an early leisurely satisfactory dinner, and then the long drive down the Rue de Rivoli to the "Paris-Lyons-Méditerranée" terminus.

I pay my bill like a duchess, smile sweetly upon the obsequious Demay, say adieu to his charming and kindly wife, and deposit a handsome gratuity in my Camille's ever-ready palm. A few moments

more, and I vanish from the scene. Shall I ever tread these boards again, and, if so, how and when? Shall I be better off or worse? There is no denying that my position might be better; but it is equally true that it might be worse, very much worse.

Which is it to be?

It is early when we get to the station: but I proceed at once to my *wagon-lit*, leaving Félicie to attend to the registration of the luggage. There I find that, of the four berths, there are two engaged, besides my own. I establish myself comfortably, and await the advent of my fellow-travellers with some interest.

Presently they make their appearance. A burly, fair-haired, thirty-five-year-old Englishman—you could detect his nationality a mile off—in a tweed suit; a slender, blue-eyed, provincial beauty of nineteen—an English woman and a bride to boot, I could swear—in a brown velvet frock and a waterproof.

The husband is trying, in English, to make the guard understand that he is only going as far as Marseilles.

"Yase! yase!" answers the official; "I spik Anglis. Ver good. *Vous déjeunerez à Marseilles.* You ave ze time. And zen—*en voiture!* Nice—Monte Carlo—alrayt!"

The bride comes to the rescue with her French. But *that* the voluble *conducteur* understands not at all.

I proffer my services in the charming manner that I have always at command, and soon restore peace to the perturbed minds of my compatriots. Friendly relations being thus established, we subside into our respective seats and begin to rub noses—metaphorically speaking, be it understood.

I verily believe that if, on my travels, I were to meet the King of the Cannibal Islands in full war-paint, I should find myself exchanging courtesies with him from mere force of habit.

Besides, in this vale of tears one never knows who may not be

useful. I myself, *moi qui vous parle*, have entertained an angel unawares more than once. A little civility goes a long way, and one cannot possibly lose by it. "*Mit Hut in Hand, geht man durchs Land*," says the German proverb; and, after all, if your travelling acquaintances turn out "stale and unprofitable," you can always drop them.

So, very soon, I am in full possession of the chief facts in their history, past, present, and future. They are a newly-married couple. He ran over to England the other day, "to get spliced," as he called it, and now he is taking his bride back with him to Marseilles.

She was a Miss Woffley,—Bella Woffley,—daughter of Woffley and Tugg, ship-brokers, Cardiff. She came to her Harry with a cheque for £20,000 in her hand. Pretty little fortune, eh? He is Harry Simkins, partner in the firm of Boufaron and Simkins, ship-brokers, Quai du Moulinet, Marseilles. He used to direct the London house; but Boufaron wants to learn English, Simkins wants to learn French, so they have changed about. And it's a great advantage to have married a girl who can speak French like Bella, isn't it?

Just at this moment—just as the warning whistle is screeching its shrillest, and the brazen bell is clanging most ear-deafeningly—just as the belated passengers are seeking their compartments most bewilderedly, and the guards are most stentoriously shouting "*En voiture, messieurs et dames! En voitur-r-re!*"—the door of our carriage is flung open, and a huge bundle of furs is hoisted in with a vigour that deposits it upon the Englishman's lap.

"—— —— you, sir! ———! What the —— do you mean by it? Right on my bad foot, too, by ——! ——! ——! ——!"

"Oh, *hush*, Harry, *hush!*" rebukes his spouse. "How *can* you use such *fearful* language?"

As for me, just as I record the poor man's exclamations in blanks, so also do I *hear* them in blanks. I look upon any one as a cad who swears habitually, especially in a woman's presence; but for a good

rattling volley of malediction, elicited by any sudden or traitorous attack, I have a sort of sneaking kindness. So I hear it in blanks. It is a great relief to the feelings, I am told. Indeed, I sometimes celebrate a little Commination Service on my own account.

Do you think the bundle of furs is alarmed at the storm it has aroused, or apologizes for the injury it has inflicted? Oh dear, no!

As the long train rumbles slowly out of the station, it turns down its voluminous collar, puffs a cloud from its huge cigar, and shrugs its podgy shoulders.

"*Mon Dieu, monsieur,*" it croaks; "*à la guerre comme à la guerre!*"

I am secretly not a little amused. Harry looks *so* furious; and the old man is *so* unabashed.

The intruder takes off his hat, and replaces it with a fez of silky Astrachan. During the operation I take a good look at him. He is old, certainly, but I cannot tell his age. He may be anything between sixty and a hundred. His hair is short, stubbly, nearly white, and not over plentiful. His face is hairless, save for a pair of bushy iron-gray eyebrows and one inch of dyed moustache, waxed at the ends, and bristling like a tooth-brush. His hooked nose almost meets his chin; from a distance you would imagine the two were holding his cigar, instead of his lips. His steely eyes he keeps veiled for the most part behind his fleshy eyelids; but he has a trick of flashing them upon you every now and then with a suddenness and a directness quite startling.

But the Englishman is bent upon his revenge. Finding that the stranger takes no notice of his ostentatious attempts at diverting from his wife's vicinity the clouds of smoke that are filling the carriage, he addresses him directly in what he believes to be French.

"*Par fewmay, Mossoo!*" he bawls in his ear, as he might to a deaf man. "*Nong! Par issy! Par cigar! Par peep! Par fewmay! Nong! Par! Dams present! Dams!*"

"My good man," answers the offender, in purest English, "I am not deaf. I am sorry if I incommode these ladies; but my medical man orders me to smoke, and smoke I shall. Doctor's order, you know, ladies. Open the window, if you like; but smoke I must!"

"I'm sure *I* don't object," I put in, amiably; "I am very fond of the smell of tobacco, when it's good."

"I rather *like* it myself," chimes in Bella; "I always used to prefer going with papa in the smoking carriage."

Harry looks rather foolish. I suspect he is calculating how many "old fools," "infernal foreigners," and the like, he has let fly this ten minutes.

"*Tant mieux!*" says the old man, in response to our courteous remarks; "but it would have been all the same: I should have smoked *quand même!*"

The old man is decidedly a bear. The one thing that attracts me about him is the blaze of his only piece of jewellery—an enormous single-stone diamond ring, that flashes lightnings across the semi-darkness whenever he raises his hand to his cigar.

Soon the desultory conversation I am carrying on with Mr. and Mrs. Simkins gave way to my desire to look into my new book, and to their inclination to give way to conjugal amenities. The bear is provided with a pile of newspapers, apparently indited in every language under the sun. He does not attempt to read them, but seems to be skimming the cream of each. My novel is decorously wrapped in brown paper, and inscribed in large characters, "*Lettres de Madame de Genlis.*" It certainly is written in French; but I have to confess that beneath the brown cover is another one in yellow, imprinted with the curiosity-rousing words, "*Les Sept Maitresses du Diable.*" When I add that these seven ladies are simply incarnation of the seven capital sins, the potentialities of the story for shocking (or amusing, as the case may be) will be evident.

I shall not say whether I am shocked or amused with what I read. I only know that, during the perusal, I fall asleep in my seat, and awake with a start to find the train pulled up in the Lyons station.

But the bear has evidently been wide awake all the time. He is still puffing at a long cigar. And the newspaper he is now engaged upon seems to be some combination of Syro-Phœnician and Chinese.

Time: Considerably past midnight.

* * * * * *

"Hullo! where are we now?" inquires Mr. Simkins, waking up, as does his better half, from a stertorian slumber in which each has apparently been trying to outvie the other in profundity and variety of snore. Verily, I should not care to sleep next door to these worthy people at any hotel where the partitions were not extra thick!

At any rate, that is *one* subject upon which they can never quarrel.

By this time, they must know that they are both given to nocturnal harmony. But what a torture it is, that sound, to the non-snoring bedfellow. Shall I ever forget my sad experiences in the same direction? I fear not.

"This is Lyons," I answer, benignantly; "there is a very good buffet here. But I suppose you dined before starting; and they always serve a capital *déjeuner* at Marseilles."

"Dined? Of course we did," returns my Briton; "but I'm devilish hungry all the same. Feel like a pound of steak and baked potatoes. What say you, lovey?"

"I think I might eat something, if I tried," answers the bride; "these foreign dinners are so unsatisfactory." And to me: "Won't you join us?"

"No, indeed, thank you," I say, with a smile; "I get out of the train as little as possible when I am travelling. And my maid will come round directly, with a cup of coffee and a *pistolet*."

Madame looks at me with increased respect now that she knows

I am accompanied by a maid, and makes for the door. As she passes the Bear, her voluminous crinolinette knocks over an open despatch-box which he had been putting into order, and scatters its contents far and wide.

"*Sac-cr-rré——!*" roars the old man, foaming at the mouth. "*Faut-il être Anglaise! Il n'y a que ces types là pour vous flanquer un coup de jupon au nez!*"

The unhappy woman, aware that she is being solemnly cursed, seeks to avert the dread stranger's wrath by falling on her knees and wildly scraping the papers together. But he pushes her back without ceremony.

"*Vade retro, Sathanas!*" he growls viciously; "go and feed yourself. You are making bad worse. Go away!"

In abject terror, she turns and flies for her life. My ursine friend does not move for a moment, but sits looking at the litter, and muttering a combination of oaths in some uncouth language—probably Kamschatkan.

I do not know what moves me to it: but I bend down and begin to pick up the documents quickly with the tips of my fingers, and deftly to make packets thereof, which I tie up with the string my dressing-bag always contains.

"*Laissez!*" grunts my *vis-à-vis*, as I place my first packet at his side. I do not take any notice, but continue my task.

"*Laissez donc, vous dis-je!*" with *crescendo* ferocity.

I proceed with my third and fourth packets.

"*Est-elle entêtée, celle-là?*" he resumes. "Madame, *will* you leave those papers alone?"

But I finish the collection with my sixth packet, pick up the despatch-box, drop my companion a deep curtsey (crab-like, owing to the paucity of room), and sink back into my seat, feeling an almost irresistible inclination to address some scathing remark to this extraordinary being.

"Humph!" he grunts, and subsides into silence.

At that moment Félicie, who has prudently lined her own inner woman first, appears at the door with my *café-au-lait* and *pistolet au beurre.* These I alternately sip and munch, conscious the while that the Bear is studying my face with a keen eye.

Then the bell clangs frantically; the guards bellow out their "*En voiture, messieurs et dames. En voitur-r-re!*" and, at the last moment, my compatriots make their appearance in the same bewildered state as at Paris, but this time with their mouths full of eatables, like the monkeys at the Zoo.

"Simply disgraceful," bursts out the Englishman, as we rumble out of the station, "the way they serve up things on the Continent. They give you twenty minutes, and three courses and dessert for three francs fifty; so far so good. But they take care to serve up their *potage* so infernally hot that, by the time you've done it, it's time to hook it!"

Why not leave the soup and attack the *entrées*, I wonder! But I remember that it is one of our insular peculiarities to eat steadily through the whole bill of fare, and to consider oneself robbed if even a single item has to be omitted.

"And then the railway officials," continues the wronged one; "insolent rabble! I took down the number of the carriage, No. 298, on purpose to have no trouble about getting back; and when the bell rang, I found the train had been shunted about, and 298 was not to be seen where I left it. So I hailed a guard in French and, '*Issy Gard! Dur-Nuff-Wheat!*' That's plain enough, I should think; and —would you believe it?—the beggar only grinned, and said, '*Ong Voytoor, mossoo, sivvaplay. Ong Voytoor!*' as if I hadn't just been asking him, in his own gibberish, where my *voytoor was!*"

I am inclined to sympathize with the *conducteur.* For there is certainly a *slight* difference between "*Dur-Nuff-Wheat!*" and "*Le*

Wagon Numéro Deux Cent Quatre-vingt Dix-huit, s'il vous plait?" But I am not cruel enough to bring a man down from his pedestal on his wedding-tour; so I hold my peace, and prepare to retire for the night.

I exchange friendly salutations with the happy couple, and then turn round to the Bear. He is still scrutinizing me, I find. "*Bon soir, monsieur,*" I venture to say.

To my great surprise, he removes his cap from his head, and his perpetual cigar from his lips.

"*Bonne nuit, madame,*" he says quite politely, with a curious smile and a little nod; "*dormez bien!*"

I retire into my sleeping-quarters, effect my *toilette de nuit* with rapidity and discretion, and proceed to "couch myself." Then I produce from the inexhaustible dressing-bag my silver flask, and administer unto myself the least suspicion of old Cognac as a *chasse-café.* Then, being really tired out with my day's work, I begin to woo the gentle Morpheus, with full confidence that he will smile upon my suit.

But, alas! I have reckoned without my host—I should say, my demigod.

Weary as I am, I toss about for hours without so much as a wink of sleep.

I don't know whether it affects other people the same way, but when I am on a long night journey, and awake, the whirl and rattle of the wheels always seem to me some monotonous chorus that the serpent-like train, with its fiery eyes and its nebulous breath, is singing to while away the time. The burden of its song is always different, but I can generally make out the words. To-night, it is repeating every five seconds: "Rum-bling along, I'm rumbling along! Rum-bling along! I'm rumbling along!"

After several audible kisses, the happy couple have sought their respective berths, and are already snoring out a most discordant duet. Not so, however, my Bear. For I can still smell the perfume of his

Havannah; I can hear the sound at regular intervals of each long-drawn puff, and the crackling of his papers as he sorts them and puts them away.

Extraordinary old creature! I find that he exercises me strangely. Why should he have spoken to me so politely just now, after being so cantankerous all the evening? Why did he smile that curious smile at me? Why has he been watching me so narrowly all the way? In a word, who is he, and what is he?

For the matter of that, he might be anything or anybody. He might be a millionnaire prince, or a well-to-do traveller in the jewellery line; he might be a Knight of Industry, or a Director of the Bank of France; he might be a theatrical manager, or a *Conseiller d'Ambassade.* He might be—what might he *not* be?

At this point of my meditations I believe I fall asleep at last. But I distinctly remember that the question which chiefly preoccupied me, and to which I attribute my abnormal wakefulness almost entirely, was:—What is there in me, in manner or mien, to attract this elderly person's attention so markedly? I cannot put "fascinate," though of course I should like to; for, though he stared at me most conscientiously, there was no admiration in his gaze. He looked amused; he looked as if he were appraising me mentally, or metaphorically weighing my points; he looked sometimes as if he were trying to rout me up from the memories of his Distant Long Ago; but he did *not* look fascinated, or even moderately *épris.*

I wake, therefore, from troubled slumbers with this interesting riddle still unsolved. It must have been very late when I went to sleep; naturally enough, it is very late when I wake. Before I open my eyes, I am aware of voices in gay conversation. They are dressing, those two turtle-doves, and are congratulating each other upon the approaching termination of their journey.

Presently the bride comes up to my berth, and shakes the curtains.

"Wouldn't you like to get up now?" she says. "We shall be at Marseilles in twenty minutes. You have just time to dress for breakfast."

I thank her feebly, and rouse myself.

"Your maid came round at some station or other about eight o'clock with some chocolate for you; but she couldn't wake you, so she gave it to me and I drank it. I hope you're not angry."

I tell the good soul that I am delighted; and I hurry on my clothes, so that, by the time we glide into the handsome station, I am armed at all points.

Whether the Bear has been to bed or not, I find him in exactly the same position in which I last saw him—smoking and sorting.

"*Bon jour, monsieur,*" I say, amiably.

"'*Jour,*" he grunts. Rudeness personified.

The Simkinses hail me effusively, and insist upon my joining their table. So, after gathering together their traps, we three make for the buffet, and the bill of fare is handed to me with a pressing request to order something eatable.

I order, as usual, with discrimination; but I think they are a little surprised at my asking for half a bottle of *Moulin-à-vent* for myself, inasmuch as *they* are going to wash down their meal *à l'Anglaise* with tea.

I have chosen a favourite soup of mine—*croûte au pot.* My newly-married friends profess themselves highly delighted with it, and I am just enjoying the first few spoonfuls, when a curious thing occurs.

A fur-wristed hand stretches over my shoulder, whisks away my soup from before me, and substitutes a basin of some smoking savoury-smelling compound.

"*Voilà pour vous!*" it growls, and disappears.

"Well, of all the infernal impertinence!" exclaims our male.

"Horrid old wretch!" chimes in his better half. "Of course you won't touch the beastly stuff, dear Mrs. Despard!"

"Oh, but I think I shall!" I retort smilingly. "It smells more than good; and I can guess what it is. I fancy it must be the *bouillabaisse*—the celebrated Marseillaise dish of which the aborigines are so proud."

"There's no accounting for tastes," says Simkins, in whose estimation I have evidently fallen a peg. "Thank goodness, I haven't tasted it yet, and I don't intend to."

By the time the bell rings for me, we have finished our *déjeuner* in peace and quiet; my compatriot has insisted upon paying the bill, and we have exchanged addresses and promises of reciprocal visits.

My new acquaintances accompany me to my carriage, and in a few minutes are waving their adieux as we start off for Nice. We,—*i. e.*, the Bear and myself. Then I resume my interesting French novel, and look out for squalls.

CHAPTER XII.

At Monte Carlo.

Hôtel de Paris, Monte Carlo, November.

LIKE other people, "dere diry," I have my likes and dislikes. My likes you know, I think, by this time: "Sugar and spice, and all that's nice." My dislikes you know also, therefore, generically, that is to say—*le revers de la médaille.*

Specifically, however, there are *some* things which I more than dislike. For instance: babies, impecuniosity, good advice, a nice long walk, high tea, kisses (feminine), Wagner, the deserving poor, the Old Masters, and—surprises!

I dislike surprises extremely: I have them *en grippe.* Even pleasant surprises annoy me a good deal. I had much rather be expecting something nice, and receive it in due course, than be suddenly overwhelmed by an access of fortune or precipitated into an ocean of bliss. When Wilfred Blundell sent me those diamond earrings last Valentine's Day, they arrived at the very bottom of a large packing-case, wrapped in innumerable different papers, and encased in countless different bags, boxes, and parcels,—a good hour's work to untie and unseal. I was delighted, of course; but I did not enjoy the tantalizing process of successively opening packing-case, hamper, old carpet bag, bonnet-box, biscuit-tin, fruit-basket, jam-pot, tooth-paste-jar, pill-box, and lead-paper;

I was quite in a temper when I got to the diamonds; I should have greatly preferred to receive them in an ordinary jewel-case.

No; I don't like even pleasant surprises.

But disagreeable surprises! I loathe them. When I am treated to one of them I feel simply murderous, as Jack says he does when a man slaps him on the back in the street. It makes me quite ill. And, knowing that a woman with a past is always subject, more or less, to these unpleasant occurrences, I have carefully trained myself to be constantly looking out for them, and therefore always ready to meet them with a smiling face and an unmoved demeanour. All of which preliminary cackle leads up to the fact that, as we emerge from Marseilles station, and start upon our swift flight for Nice, my *vis-à-vis* and sole companion addresses me abruptly.

"Well, Mrs. Despard," he says, in English, with a twinkle in his keen eye; "and how do you like Marseilles soup now you have tasted it, Mrs. Despard?"

Internally, I am "flabbergasted"; I am thunderstruck; I am knocked out of time. How *on earth* did the old fellow find out my name? I never advertise myself on the outside of my dressing-bag, novels, and other belongings; so he could not have spotted me *that* way. And he could not have got it from the Simkinses, because they did not know my name themselves, until we exchanged cards after breakfast just now. Most mysterious!

Outwardly, however, I show no sign of mental perturbation. "I liked it very much," I answer, calmly; "only there was more garlic in it than even I care about. I don't mind a little when I am in a garlicky neighbourhood, *bien entendu;* but I don't like my food to *reek* of it."

I purposely abstain from taking any notice of his use, or abuse, of my name. I think he is rather disappointed, for he flashes a look at me, and then returns to the charge.

"Humph!" he grunts; "you don't like too much seasoning, Mrs. Despard? Your taste is not vitiated, Mrs. Despard? *A la bonne heure*, Mrs. Despard!"

This time the challenge is so pointed that I cannot avoid "taking official notice" of it.

"Really, you have very much the advantage of me," I say, with dignity. "You seem to be very familiar with my name; I am not aware that we have ever met before."

"Oh, yes! I know your name," he laughs; "I know your name quite well."

"I cannot think how or where you can have learnt it," I retort, waxing wrath; "I am sure I have never seen you in my life. Nor heard of you either!"

"That is very probable," grins the Bear, composedly. "Indeed, it is more than probable,—it is the fact. You have never seen me before, Mrs. Despard. As far as I know, you have never heard of me."

"In that case," I resume, really irritated at his mocking accents, "I shall be obliged if you will kindly inform me how it is that you know me so well."

"*Rien n'est plus facile, madame*," he answers, lighting a cigar; "but it would advance you in nothing."

"I beg your pardon," I exclaimed, hotly; "I have every right to ask the question, and to demand an answer. It is all very well to travel with complete strangers, and to enter into conversation with them; but it is anything but agreeable to talk to a person whom you do not know from Adam, and who has your name at his fingers' ends."

"*Madame a mille fois raison*," bows the stranger; "and, therefore, I will proceed to satisfy your legitimate curiosity. Why do I know you, Mrs. Despard? Because I have seen you."

"Seen me?" I repeat, calmly, but with inward nervousness. "*Where?*"

"Here, madame," he smiles; "in this carriage!"

"Monsieur,"—in injured tones—"you are presuming upon my good nature. I am not accustomed to be laughed at!"

"Laughed at! *Behüte!*" cries the cosmopolitan. "Nothing was further from my thoughts. But perhaps I did not make my meaning quite clear. I said 'because I have seen you'; I should have said 'because I have been observing you all the way from Paris'; that is why I know you."

"But that," I reply, somewhat mollified, "would not put you in possession of my name. I do not carry it written on my face, by any chance; do I?"

"No, indeed," says my companion. "*Tout au contraire!* You have the bump of secrecy very fully developed, I am sure, Mrs. Despard. But, come; I will mystify you no longer. When I first set eyes upon you, your face inspired me with a vague interest. I felt sure I had seen it before. I felt sure I should see it again. In these dispositions I began by ransacking the storehouse of my memory—a very tenacious one, by the way—for a *souvenir* of you. I continued by observing you, by making a study of you; I ended, as I have just had the honour of remarking, by knowing you."

"But, the name, the name!" I cry, so thoroughly uneasy by this time that I affect an anxiety which I do not feel, to conceal the grave searchings of heart which I do.

"The name! the name!" repeats my ursine friend. "That came simply enough. Madame forgets that she is accompanied by a maid. That maid—Félicie, *n'est ce pas?*—came to awake madame this morning at seven o'clock. Madame did not move. Félicie called her by name several times. 'A very pretty name,' I thought; and I remembered it. *Voilà tout!* Simplicity itself."

We are trundling rapidly through some of the most charming scenery in the world. On the left the Alps gleam whitely in the

distance; on the right the blue expanse of the Mediterranean dances, and glitters, and foams. Everywhere there are vistas of picturesque villages, semi-tropical vegetation, rugged rocks, and smiling pastures. But the beauties of the Cornice are too well-known and too super-excellent to call for any description from so weakly a pen as mine, even if I were in the mood to watch and note them down as we flit past. And, as I am too excited, too full of conjecture as to who this personage may be and what he may really know of me, to pay any attention to Mother Nature, we will, like any other Royalty, take my effusions "as read." "Who on earth *is* this Nineteenth Century Sphinx?"

"Simplicity itself, indeed," I repeat, with an easy laugh. "Very silly of me not to have seen it before. But exchange is no robbery, Monsieur. As you are in possession of my full style and title, the least you can do is to let me know, on your side, with whom I have had the advantage of travelling."

"*Mais avec beaucoup de plaisir, madame,*"—producing a card-case—"Permit me." And, scribbling a few words on the card, he hands it to me.

I look at it with interest: "Paul Dromiroff"—in copper-plate; "Hôtel des Anges, Monte Carlo"—in pencil.

"Ah, M. Dromiroff," I murmur, "I thought we had never met."

"Perhaps," he observes, quietly; "but the world is very small."

I am again a good deal exercised by this enigmatical creature; but I cannot find any clue in his impassive face to any hidden meaning his words may contain.

"You said just now," I continue, more for the sake of talking than anything else, "that you had been *studying* me, that you were satisfied that you *knew* me. May I ask you to impart the result of your observations?"

"If you promise not to be offended," says Dromiroff, "I will."

I give the required promise; and he clears his throat, and begins.

"You are a woman of the world, Mrs. Despard. You are not so young as you used to be; but you know it, and, ten years hence, you will look younger than your juniors. You are an arrant flirt; you are accustomed to admiration and deference, and when you do not get it you are vexed. But something you *must* have; if you can't ensure admiration, you insist upon being noticed—you refuse to remain in the background. You are a woman of the world; you make friends wherever you go—they *may* be useful, you think; the more friends the fewer enemies. And so you make them believe that they do not bore you, that you do not notice their peculiarities, that you do not laugh at their eccentricities. You are a woman of pleasure; you are fond of forbidden fruit; you indulge your little propensities. But your position is not lofty enough to permit of your despising *les convenances;* so you bow to conventionality, you enjoy *sub rosâ*, you chuckle to yourself behind the veil of discretion. All your tastes are dainty, luxurious, expensive; your dress, your food, your lodging; your waking and your sleeping; all and each are necessaries; but, with Mrs. Despard, necessaries are extravagances. But, pardon me; I forget myself. I am too *brutal* for you, too plain-spoken."

"Not in the least!" I asseverate, mendaciously; "I like it; it amuses me. Pray go on."

I am beginning to be a little frightened of this man. Monsieur Paul Dromiroff is certainly a very observant fellow-traveller.

"You are a married woman, of course. But you have no husband. Either you are a widow, or, more likely, you are separated. You are very ambitious; you are very secret; you have great self-control, a vast store of self-possession. Your aim is a high one,—*vous arrivercz!* I have done."

We both keep silence for a while. Then, assuming a careless demeanour, I confess that he has more than once hit the nail on the head, and ask him to be good enough to tell me upon what in the

world he has founded his extremely minute diagnosis of my character. He answers mysteriously that this is not the last time we shall meet, and that he will tell me all about it on the next occasion we are thrown together.

Then he engages me in different but amusing conversation; and it is not long before we arrive at Nice and Monte Carlo. There we go our different ways; he to the Hôtel des Anges, I and Félicie to the Hôtel de Paris.

I find two letters awaiting me. One is from Algy. I open it at once, and read:—

"*Hôtel des Anges.*

"My dearest Mrs. Despard,—You will find that I have engaged rooms for you at the Paris. I suppose you will arrive to-morrow. Send me a little note *the moment* you get this, and believe me to be,

"Ever yours most sincerely,

"Algy Balfour.

"P.S.—I thought, under the circumstances, it would be better that we should not be staying at the *same* hotel."

I sit down and write the desired note. I tell him that I shall expect him to come and take me to dinner at the *café*.

Having sent off my missive, I go through an elaborate and deliciously refreshing toilet, and, after a cup of coffee, stroll off across the Place into the Casino Gardens to read my other letter at leisure. It is from Jack, and runs to this effect:—

"*Denston Park, November.*

"Dear old Lena,—I never was a good hand at letter-writing, as well you know; but I find this particular letter more difficult to get through than most.

"The fact is I have so much to tell, and yet so little to tell; I have nothing but good news to give you, and yet it is not good news, after all.

"I really believe I have done the trick this time. If ever a woman showed unmistakable signs of being struck with a man, Miss Vyse is that woman. She encourages me in every possible way. She allows me to go with her everywhere; dance with her, ride, drive, and play billiards with her; make love to her;—everything but propose to her!

"The other day she came out with the lunch to us when we were popping at the pheasants. After lunch I managed to get lost with her in the woods. 'No more pheasants to-day,' I thought; 'better game than that!'

"Do you think she would let me get in a word edgewise? Nothing of the sort. I came back no better off than I started.

"Yesterday she asked me to give her a lead with the Loamshire Hounds. We had a capital day's sport; and I took her home by a short cut. *Short!* It was five miles out of our way. Now or never, I thought. But no. The girl slips out of my hands like an eel. She has some infernal secret of bringing one right up to the mark, and then somehow making it impossible for a fellow to speak seriously to her.

"Aggravating, isn't it?"

"I shall try again to-night, and perhaps things will turn out better.

"There's no other news, and I'm off to dress for dinner; so good-bye. Yours as always, JACK.

"By the way, could you manage to let me have a couple of ponies? I lost rather heavily at whist last night. Do, there's a good soul."

As I raise my eyes from the *cri du cœur*, two figures approach me slowly, arm-in-arm. One is tall and thin; the other short and stout; both elderly.

I know the tall one. Prince Volgareff, Russian Ambassador at the Court of Westphalia.

I know the other too, now. Monsieur Paul Dromiroff, by all that's astonishing!

* * * * * *

A trying ordeal is the first appearance of an unprotected female in a crowded hotel *salon*, where she knows absolutely not a soul, and wherein any few seats that may be vacant seem always to be at the far end. A trying ordeal—even to such as Lena Despard, who, by the way, is pretty well practised in such matters. And, therefore, to be able to go through it successfully and with dignity is all the more creditable to the new arrival. A good "entrance" poses a woman at once.

The secret, however, of ensuring an effective *début* in any society lies in a nutshell. It consists simply of having previously ascertained that one is above criticism, that there is no single chink in one's armour, that one's appearance is, as far as it goes, without a flaw.

It was an American—wasn't it?—who explained her aplomb at a St. James's drawing-room by saying that "there is more moral support conveyed by a Paris-made dress than can be derived from the best religious principles?" And if, in addition to one of Pingat's marvels, you possess the happy knack of putting it on and "setting it off," your success is assured. As Madame de Girardin says somewhere: "There is but one way of wearing a beautiful gown, and that is to forget it."

Now, I am fortified by both these advantages. I am wearing a black satin frock, relieved with some good old lace, that fits me like a glove, and sets off my golden head; and I look as if I didn't know that everybody is admiring it, and some people — the men — are admiring *me.*

Those inhabitants of the Hôtel de Paris who dine at the *table-d'hôte* are assembled in the *salon* and awaiting their dinner. I undulate imperially through their midst, and subside gracefully into the most comfortable lounge I can find. Then I proceed to take stock of my surroundings.

I notice that there is a good sprinkling of my compatriots. The men are pretty nearly all of the same type; good form, or at all events lacquered with the veneer thereof. Of the women, the majority are of the lively sort, many over-dressed, some *under*-dressed; all chattering volubly about that which (at Monaco) is "the one thing needful"—*la veine.* But there are others, dowdy, frumpish vinegary—

> "There are mincing women, mewing,
> Like cats who amant miseré,
> Of their own virtue and pursuing
> Their gentler sisters to that ruin
> Without which—what were chastity?"

—as my beloved Shelley hath it. Why *will* such creatures intrude their gawky presence upon every scene of festivity, upon every beautiful landscape? Why *will* they hang on to jolly people who literally abhor them? Why, oh, why, do they *exist at all?*

I confess that I am somewhat surprised and a good deal put out when we troop off to dinner at the sonorous summons of the bell without any later arrival than mine to increase our number. Now I know Algy got here last week. Why has he not flown to my summons?

Trusting mentally that he has not fallen into the hands of some siren even more dangerous than myself, I go off with the rest and find myself ensconced between a blushing young Englishman, who is too much in awe of me to speak, and a fat old German, who is too much engrossed with his viands even to listen. So my meal is not a merry one; but as it is extremely well served, and I am really hungry, I get through it *tant bien que mal.*

Just as the first batch of us rises, probably in a hurry to get back to the seductions of *roulette* and *trente-et-quarante*, I spy a tall, fair man in the doorway, eagerly looking down the long vista of faces. It is Algy Balfour, but with a drawn, battered look about his pale face that I have not seen there before. Indeed, to use Jack's favourite, but

somewhat vulgar, expression, he looks rather "like a boiled owl in a white choker."

I rise, and sail up to him with outstretched hand.

"Ah, Mr. Balfour!" I exclaim, "at last. I have been wondering what has become of you." And then as we go out together: "Why, Algy, what on earth is the matter? You didn't look yourself in town; but now you look ever so much worse. You are as haggard as if you had had the nightmare for a week."

"I don't know, I am sure, what it is," he answers, with a constrained laugh; "I haven't felt very well lately. I've been a good deal worried about business since I saw you. Not money, you know; but, well—business—legal business. And to-day I am angry with myself."

"What about?" I inquire, resuming my seat in the *salon*.

"Why, I was fool enough to go over to Nice," he says, "just the very day of all others I should have stopped here. So I missed you. And that riles me to begin with."

"And what riles you next?" I say, with the sigh of a woman who is content at last.

"I went to the Méditerranée—the Club, you know—and there (I suppose, to punish me for not being here to welcome you) I dropped pretty heavily at baccarat."

Out of the corner of my eye I can just see the Albionesses who were jarring upon my every æsthetic fibre before dinner. I direct his attention to them discreetly and imperceptibly. They are sitting close by, and evidently listening. I whisper, "They have been howling against the national sin of *roulette* all dinner-time!" Then I raise my voice *very* slightly.

"What! gambling, Mr. Balfour?" I drawl, in mock horror. "Are you not quite ashamed of yourself? Don't you know that gambling is very, *very* wicked?"

"Very natural, you mean," he retorts, also in a raised voice. "Mark

my words, a deep-seated passion for gambling is inherent in the nature of man. It is of all time, of all places. Whether it is Lazarus risking his half-pence on the precarious chances of pitch-and-toss in the kennel, or Dives, whose millions hang on the rise and fall of the Stock Exchange; curly Innocence, who invests his little savings in the big boys' Derby sweep, or my Lord Tarquin, who stands to win untold thousands on Greased Lightning; whether it is the belle of the season, who stakes youth, health, beauty, and happiness in the little game of matrimony, and sometimes loses; or whether it is the old Countess Grimalkin, who has played out all the trumps of her wasted life, and is missing every trick with her last cards—all men are gamblers! So are you, and so am I—more or less, of course, according to our different temperaments and positions in life; but we are all infected with the same disease."

What has come to Algy Balfour? I never heard him make such a long speech before. And how determined he looks over it, too!

"Saul among the prophets!" I cry, gaily clapping my hands. "Let no one tell me the young man of the period has nothing to say for himself after *this!*"

"And, periodically," he continues, warming to his work, and noting with evident delight the disgusted looks of our angular English friends, "this disease breaks out into an epidemic. Witness such national disasters as the Law Mississipi scheme, the South Sea Bubble, the Railway mania of King Hudson's day, and the money crisis that comes round every dozen years or so. Then, when thousands of families have been ruined; when a few tales of terrible misery have got into the morning papers, and several cases of gentlemanly villainy and swindling philanthropic projects have cropped up in the law courts, the world shakes its sapient head, and its children become sadder and wiser men. And then another swindle becomes the rage, another 'capital opportunity of making a fortune without the slightest risk' arises; and it needs but one idiot to lead

the van, and invest his patrimony, for his brother geese to follow suit and go and do likewise. And yet that is not gambling!"

"Why, Algy!" I interrupted, in undisguised astonishment; "you have missed your vocation. You ought really to be in Parliament."

"I would say with Byron," he continues oratorically, "'Oh, for a forty-parson power to chant thy praise, Hypocrisy!' A man may ruin fifty-hundred people by his operations in the money market with *their* hard earned gains, and yet he is no gambler. Far from it! He is an unfortunate but respectable man. A poor fellow takes his last napoleon, his own property, over there to the Casino, and loses it. He is a worthless scamp, an outcast and a sinner, a gambler! I can only say I had rather shake hands with the gambler than the hypocrite."

By this time, the British virgins are thoroughly aghast. They are obviously meditating precipitate flight. But Algy has risen, and is offering me his arm.

"Here endeth the first lesson," he says with a laugh, in which, to my practical ear, there is something now undoubtedly discordant.

"And now, Mrs. Despard, to prove our mutual contempt for the hypocritical agitation against the punting at Monte Carlo, shall we go over the rooms for an hour and try our luck?" I assent cheerfully; and presently I emerge from the hotel, leaning on the stalwart arm that I am hoping—oh, how fervently!—is to have charge of poor dear little me for the remainder of my natural existence.

CHAPTER XIII.

My Big Fish Bites.

Hôtel de Paris, Monte Carlo. (*Same date.*)

A LOVELIER sight it would be difficult to find in Europe (or, indeed, anywhere) than that which meets our eyes as we issue from the hospitable doors of the hotel.

Night has already closed in, and the white moon is sweeping imperially up to her high throne. The countless stars are glittering like big diamonds upon the pure dark violet of the sky, with a brilliancy that they seem to reserve exclusively for their favourite *midi*. Opposite us are sharply defined the domes and spires of the Casino; and the gay *place* we have to cross seethes with a crowd of punters—people are all punters here—who, having just dined, are in a good temper, and confident of "pulling it off" to-night. As we reach the dusky gardens, studded with quaint tropical plants, we become aware of the subtle perfume of exotic flowers, and of the soft gleam of myriads of lamps everywhere. Here and there a bright globe of electric light, far above our heads, vies with the splendour of Lady Luna, and lights up the whole scene. An intermittent file of various equipages is whirling up to the doors of the Temple of Fortune, and depositing eager worshippers under its portico. A military band is discoursing sweet music in the *parterre*. And the purple mountains look down upon us from a distance, and the restless Mediterranean sends up deep sighs at us from below.

We go up the broad steps into the Casino, and presently are mingling with the crowd about the roulette table.

"I never knew Monte Carlo so full as this before," said Algy, elbowing a path for us, "at this early period of the season. There are as many people here to-night as there are in the first week of January." For the well-known room, with its Moorish decorations, is about as crammed as it well can be. And here, in the throng of the world's noblest and basest, loveliest and most reckless, proudest and vilest, wealthiest, most hopelessly ruined, and deepest sunk in the mire, I recognize most of the faces and types that were familiar to me when I was last here.

When I was last here! What a difference!

When I was last here I was with my heart-beloved friend (and partner) Lady Fitz-Ernest. We played a little. Everybody here plays, as I said before, more or less; and, if you do not play, you are looked upon as a suspicious character, a personage with "ulterior motives."

"*Que diable est-elle venu faire dans cette galère?*" they would say directly. "Are there not Nice, Hyères, Cannes, Mentone, San Remo, Antibes, and the rest, for the scrupulous? She must be pigeon-hunting!" *Et patati, et patata.*

So we *did* play a little, a very little; for we had come to Monte Carlo to make money, not to lose it.

We were on the war-path. We occupied a charming little *appartement au second*, with a balcony looking on to the sea; and we found that *salon* and that balcony a very profitable investment. As soon as the tables were closed there was supper waiting over at our place, with music and baccarat to follow, for the delectation of such of our friends (chiefly male) whom we could inveigle. "Chiefly male," did I say? They were *all* of that persuasion, for the members of the softer sex who made up the party, and helped at the piano, were merely

"Lena," he says, "can you tell me what it is to love?"

dummies. No, my "dere diry," they were not *decoys*. Lady Fitz-Ernest and I were not silly enough to invite any woman better-looking than ourselves. *We* were the decoys, if you *will* have it, though the word is abominably plain-spoken. As for the others of my sex, I used to call them "clerks to the firm—the firm of Despard and Company, money changers."

There was very high play in that same *salon*, I can tell you, every now and then, when the champagne and chartreuse had done their work, and the strains of some rattling opéra-bouffe were pealing through the smoke-laden air. And there was very desperate flirtation on that same balcony, I can testify, what time poor *dear* little Lena was trying to console some titled fledgling for his losses, and to dissuade him from tempting fortune any further. *Par parenthèse*, I may here remark that, if you want to induce a man to gamble, the most fatal policy is to press him to take a hand. Whereas, on the other hand, if you entreat him with tears in your eyes never to touch a card again, the erst-recalcitrant youth will fly back to the tables at the very earliest opportunity. I speak from experience. That was *my* department in the business, and I was remarkably successful in the retrieving of my partner's lost birds.

But it was a precarious life and a dangerous one. We were not always able to secure guests for our little feast. The bank was sometimes very empty, and then we were reduced to expedients. The *Mont-de-Piété* knew both of us; and, once or twice, we had even to go so far as—I wouldn't have anybody but you, "dere diry," know it for the Universe!—as to invite chance Casino acquaintances to supper, on the mendacious strength of their "having been introduced to us last year!" On one occasion (which I shall never, *never* forget, if I lived to a hundred) our supposed *connaissances d'il y a un an* were three Roumanian Boyars. They certainly lost their money, to our entire satisfaction; but, to our equally unmitigated horror, we soon found that they had mistaken us for—for something else! Fortunately, Jack

Fortinbras had dropped in that evening, and he got rid of them pretty sharply; but the horrible recollection still makes me shudder.

And, of course, though such people as Jack Fortinbras are very useful *at times*, and though any breach of confidence on their part would cut both ways, it is very disagreeable to be, to a certain extent, in their power, and—*very expensive*, as I have found to my cost.

"Honesty is the best policy," doubtless (as somebody once said who had tried the alternative), but, like other luxuries, you must be able to afford it.

Thank Heaven, I can afford it, now!

What a difference between Then and Now! Now, I am amply provided with money, for the time being; now I am under the protection, *en tout bien, tout honneur*, of an English landed proprietor, a young man who has the *entrée* everywhere, and whose society is sought, not only for his wealth, but for his personal qualities; now, I am on the high road back to respectability, rolling, as it were, on cee-springs towards the assembly of British matrons.

I look about me with a sudden access of dignity, and pass in review all the familiar *habitués* of the place. There they are, in battle array—the people with systems and the people without; the punter who is risking the superfluity of his banking account, and the punter who is staking the proceeds of his watch and chain; the wizened old French countess, who never leaves her seat from morning till night, and the pretty American who flits about the room, to pop down her dollars from ever-varying points "for luck;" the young English squire with his brand-new bride, and the old English marquis with his fiftieth mistress; the polite individual who will keep your seat for you, while you go out to dine, for a louis, and the hump-backed girl to whom you give "what you please" for the privilege of rubbing your stake upon her lucky hump; the reckless millionnaire; Russian princes; the cautious, fat German stock-jobbers; the irrepressible Parisian *cocottes*,

those daughters of the horse-leech, and the unmistakable British papa, with "the girls," those incongruities of the bold face and the innocent mind—all are there, some of them very much "all there," most of them very much otherwise.

As I look, I cannot marvel that people flock to Monaco like moths about a candle; for whether you see it for the first time, or whether it is no longer a novelty to you, a *salle de jeu* is an exciting scene. The warm atmosphere of the brilliantly-decorated rooms; the confused hum of conversation, which rises now and then into a buzz of admiration as some great *coup* is made, mingled with the chink of glittering gold pieces, the crisp crackling of bank-notes, and the monotonous voice of the croupiers; the occasional shrill laugh of triumph, or hoarse, deep curse of despair; the mellow light of the chandeliers pouring down upon rustling silks and shining satins, lace in clouds, and a Golconda of diamonds; the variegated colours, the beautiful faces, the greedy rakes, the fluttering fans, the very excitement of the crowd itself—no, I do not wonder that my fellow-geese are fascinated. I am not surprised that the fever is contagious. I am only astounded that so many, having heard of the intoxicating draught, can refrain from tasting it, or, having once caught the infection, can ever be cured!

I have arrived at this point of my meditations when I am accosted by a feminine voice.

"*Ma petite,*" it says, "*vous avez la veine dans les yeux. Voulez-vous me faire 'celle' de me flanquer ces cent francs sur le quatorze?*"

But she does not say "*flanquer.*" I turn round. She is a *cocotte,* sweetly pretty, exquisitely dressed, and rather tipsy.

With my usual amiability, I am about to comply with the fair Cyprian's request, when Algy lays his hand on my arm.

"I won't allow it, Mrs. Despard," he says, roughly; "it would be contamination. *Ally au deearble, Madamazel!*"

Poor Algy speaks the French of Stratford-atte-Bowe—

"*Commong osy voo parly ar oon dam com Madam?* Come away, Mrs. Despard. This is no place for *you!*"

I obey, a good deal against the grain, for the old play fever was already stealing over me; but I am secretly not a little gratified at the authoritative tone which my Algy has assumed. A man has no right to speak like that to a woman unless he is her husband, or intends to be her husband. It is very pleasant to be hauled out of the *salle de roulette* by a handsome man with a huge income. It is more than pleasant to think that that income will be mine very soon, unless I am labouring under an equally huge mistake.

The tipsy lady is taken aback for the moment, but very speedily finds her tongue.

"*Va-t-en-toi-même à tous les diables,*" she cries, with a string of the latest fashionable oaths; "*toi et ta catin, qui fait la Sainte Nitouche espèce de —— type que tu es!*" But we are already at the other end of the room, and, passing through the great swing-doors, very soon find ourselves in the Casino Theatre.

Having dragged me away from the tables lest my angelic purity should be contaminated, dear Algy is rather vexed to discover that even here it is not so safe as it might be; for to-night they are playing "*Les Onze Mille Vierges de Paris,*" the play which so vastly diverted me during my stay in Paris. And, if possible, the play is even naughtier here thar there. There are a goodly array of *figurantes* in the airiest of costumes; there is a large sprinkling of the *haute cocotterie* in the stalls; the spaces on the walls between the grinning white masks are filled with very realistic semi-nudities; and the big chandelier in the florid ceiling is diffusing an oppressive heat throughout the heavily-gilded saloon.

After listening to half an act, which I am secretly enjoying immensely, but which repeatedly makes Mr. Balfour of Balfour shudder, and look round at me nervously to see if I am shocked, he leans over to me, and suggests that I have had enough of it.

"This stupid piece bores you, I know," he whispers; "you can't understand a word of it, I can see. And, by Jove, it's just as well you don't. I never heard such filth in my life! Let's go out into the gardens, and have a chat."

So we go out into the gardens.

This place is certainly a Paradise in the moonlight. I am not sorry to be out here, among the lovely flowers and in the balmy air.

We find a comfortable seat, establish ourselves, and then, after tenderly wrapping up my precious person so tightly that I can hardly move, Algy lights a cigar, and for some moments puffs at it in silence. Then, whether moved by the spirit, or by the gracious influence of the lovely scene around him, or by my "precious presence," he speaks suddenly: "Lena," he says, "can you tell me what it is *to love?*"

So astounded am I by the manner and the matter of Algy Balfour's last remark that he has to repeat it before I can realize that it is indeed he who has spoken, and that, to all appearances, he is anxiously awaiting an answer to his interpellation.

"Lena," he says again, in a deep emotional voice, which he has not turned on in *my* presence before; "Lena, do you know what it is *to love?*"

And then, like the people in Parliament, he "pauses for a reply," and looks things unutterable.

In itself the observation is not an intempestive one, for it is now the "very witching time of night," *not* "when churchyards yawn," but

> . . . When Phœbe doth behold
> Her silver visage in the watery glass,
> Decking with liquid pearl the bladed grass;

when odorous flowers put forth their subtlest scent and a lovely scene looks its loveliest; when distant music falls most voluptuously upon the ear, and azure eyes gleam out most provokingly from under the dainty swansdown of such a *capuchon* as mine; when, in a word, a man who

has dined satisfactorily is most inclined to let his mind "lightly turn to thoughts of love."

And the subject of conversation which he has started does not wholly take me by surprise. From his unusual demeanour, his somewhat agitated style of address, his action in whisking me away from "the wrath to come" a few minutes ago, I had expected that our chat would take a serious turn, and tend towards the disburdening of his lacerated bosom. I had expected him to confide in me the full, true, and particular history of his *grande passion*, and to seek comfort in my sympathy. Indeed, if he had not volunteered his confidences, I had fully made up my mind to invite them; and if he had not appealed to my sympathy, I quite intended to offer it. Full well do I know how near akin are love and pity. I am aware, none better, that there is no time more propitious for catching a man in the matrimonial landing-net than when he is, as it were, "on the hop;" when his pride is still smarting under defeat, and his wounded heart is most grateful for, and most in need of, the balm a pretty woman has generally among her other "properties." And I have heard that it happens not unfrequently, when such a man begins by making the pretty woman his confidant, that he ends by—making her his wife as well.

So our confabulation had been all neatly programmed out beforehand; in my little noddle, at least.

But that which causes all my astonishment is in his dramatic choice of words, inflection of voice, expression of face. No love-sick Strephon could have asked the question of me in more heart-broken, true-lover style than this very fashionable young gentleman, whose chief characteristic used to be an entire absence of emotion, and whose chief aversion, according to his own account, was his horror of a scene.

It would have seemed quite natural for him to begin with: "Look here, Mrs. Despard! Don't you think that Vyse girl behaved to me most infernally shamefully?" *That* would have been Algy all over.

But this is different; this is unexpected; this, I may add at once, is highly gratifying. For I know very well how to play on a man's feelings when he *has* any; but, when my patient is as heart-whole as I am myself, it is simply a case of "diamond cut diamond."

So I suit my answer to the occasion; and, having taken time to remember a quotation, address him with a dulcet languor in my voice, and with my favourite "far-off" look in my eyes, to this effect:—

"Surely, dear Mr. Balfour, you have not forgotten the most poetic, the most beautiful, the most heartfelt reply to your pathetic question? You remember what dear old Shakespeare says in 'As You Like It'? I once played Rosalind myself (in happier days, alas!) and I think I can recall the sweet words. Shall I repeat them for you?"

"Yes!" murmurs Algy, in a rough whisper.

"It runs something like this, I think:—

"Good shepherd, tell this youth what 'tis to love.
It is to be all made of sighs and tears;
It is to be all made of faith and service;
It is to be all made of fantasy,
All made of passion, and all made of wishes;
All adoration, duty and observance,
All humbleness, all patience, and impatience,
All purity, all trial, all observance."

There is a minute's silence after my musical tones have artistically died away.

"It is *very* beautiful," I say, at last, with a fluttering sigh, "is it not? And *very* true!"

"It is, indeed!" falters Algy, in hoarse accents. "God help me!"

He has turned his head away, and is breathing hard and fast. Now is my opportunity. I rest one of my delicately-gloved hands on his, but do not speak. That I feel I had better leave *him* to do. And I have not long to wait.

"*Damn* the woman!" he cries at last. At such a moment a woman

would burst into tears and lay her head on the sympathizing shoulder. At such a moment a man generally bursts into Billingsgate, more or less refined according to his position in life. A woman weeps because she feels chiefly the loneliness of her desertion—she sees nothing but loneliness in the future; a man swears because, in the first place, his pride is hurt at having been knocked off his pedestal (men are much more conceited than we are, I think!), and, secondly, because he is angry at having, metaphorically speaking, "cast his pearls before swine," at having wasted the store of his strong, honest, manly love upon so unworthy an object as a silly female who does not know its value.

"I tell you, Lena," he resumes, after a pause (how he is slipping into the use of the "Lena," to be sure!), "all that you have said about Love, all that and more I had in my heart for her. In my time I have loved or *thought* I loved scores of women, of course. But I never loved a woman like this. I loved her as purely as if she were a goddess, and I her worshipper; I loved her as passionately as a miser loves his gold, as Romeo loved Juliet, as—but why waste words upon her? She was deceiving me, probably laughing at me throughout,—she who had the truest, the faithfullest look in her eyes that I have ever seen in any living being, except, perhaps"—a bitter laugh—"except, perhaps, in the eyes of a dog!"

"Do not grieve so, Mr. Balfour—poor Algy!" I murmur soothingly. "It is very hard to bear, I know. I, too, have suffered. But think! If you had married her, and had *then* found out that she did not care for you as you expected, as you *deserve* to be cared for? How terrible that would have been! Be thankful that it is not *yet* too late to find happiness."

"Happiness!" he repeats, scornfully. "How can any man expect to find happiness in marriage when women do not even know the *meaning* of the word 'fidelity'? I tell you I would now rather trust my old dog, Lion, than the best seeming woman under the sun. Fidelity? Bah, you don't even know what it means."

"Ah, Mr. Balfour," I sigh reproachfully; "I think *I* could tell you what it means."

Again the memory of a fine passage flits opportunely into my mind. Very useful sometimes is superficial knowledge. It is very difficult to tell good paste from diamonds—in the moonlight.

"I really beg your pardon, Mrs. Despard," he says, hastily; "I did not mean *you* in particular. Of course not. There is something different in *you* from the vulgar herd; or else I should not now be boring you with my lamentations. I meant women in general. Well, and what is *your* idea of fidelity?"

I assume an oracular look, and speak quickly and *avec des larmes dans la voix.*

"Fidelity! Ah, there is little of it in the world, I fancy. A marriage is to me null and void without fidelity, not only of act, but of thought, of mind, of heart; and fidelity makes in God's sight a marriage tie holier than any man can forge, and one which no human laws can sever. What do I call fidelity? I think it is to keep faithful through good report and evil report, through suffering and, if need be, through shame; it is to credit no evil of the one loved from other lips, and, if told that such evil is true by his own, to blot it out as though it had never been; to keep true to him through all appearances, however against him —through silence, and absence, and trial; never to forsake him by one thought, and to brave all the world to serve him; *that* is what seems fidelity to me, nothing less—nothing less!"

As I stop, my voice breaks into a little uncontrollable sob, and my lips quiver with an emotion that is not wholly assumed. On the stage I have seen Ellen Terry weep copiously; poor Adelaide Neilson used to shed real tears as she was going through her imaginary sorrows, and I have really worked myself up into a state of quite respectable excitement. But I do not cry; the crystal drops hang prettily on the edge of my long lashes, that is all. As I wipe them away with my

bit of lace that I call a pocket-handkerchief, Algy seizes both my hands in his, and, in his turn, attempts to console me.

"Good God!" he cries, agitatedly, "I never knew——Dear Mrs. Despard, you will forgive me, won't you? With my stupid maunderings I have roused some painful recollection. I ought not to have started such a wretched conversation. I know I'm enough to give anybody the blues; but if I had known for a moment that there had been sadness in your past, I never would have forced my confidences upon you like this."

Forced his confidences, indeed! Poor young man,—*si tu savais ce que j'ai à te dire!*

"But I never knew, believe me," he continues, "that *you* also had had troubles of the—of the heart. I thought all your worries had been pecu—had been about—about *money*."

"*Money!*" I exclaim scornfully. "Ah, Mr. Balfour, you do not know me yet. If you only knew how *little* I value money, how I *despise* it except for the good it enables one to do, and the—and the happy days it can sometimes ensure."

"But you will tell me," he says eagerly; "you will confide in me the story of your wrongs; for wrongs they were, I am very sure. Let me be your friend in deed as well as in name. Give me the privilege of knowing your real self as well as your charming society self."

"Not now!" I say, rising, and putting my hand to "my fevered brow," with a deep sigh; "not now! I could not bear it now. Some other time. Better some other time. I shall be stronger. Come, let us go."

And so we go. He escorts me back to the hotel in silence, and there—nobody being on the steps—presses a fervent kiss on my fingers, and departs.

On the whole, I am inclined to think that things might look worse. As he left me he said: "*A demain.*"

Well, then, *à demain.*

CHAPTER XIV.

I Break the Bank.

Hôtel de Paris, Monte Carlo.

SEVERAL days have passed, my faithful gossip, since I had a chat with you; several days, which have slipped away pleasantly enough, but which have been absolutely devoid of incident worth recording in your dainty pages.

I have made one or two acquaintances; I have changed my frocks four times a day; I have dawdled about with Algy, morning, afternoon, and evening; and I have lived the life of Monte Carlo, which is now so familiar to everybody that it needs no further description.

But, though I have seen so much of Algy, he has not again relapsed into the favourable mood of our first night in the Casino gardens. He has fallen back into his old self. He is very attentive, delightfully assiduous, "all that there is of most charming;" but he is not in love,—at least, not with me. And I have taken care to return his lead. I don't wish to frighten my bird, so I leave sentimental situations to come of themselves. I flirt with him a good deal, it is true; but I don't make love to him; my chief object is to make my company necessary to him. I amuse him, therefore, to the top of his bent, so as to make him "miss me most dreadfully" (to use his own words) whenever—and that is very often—I do not make my promised appearance in the gardens or at the theatre.

Very uneventful, indeed, up to yesterday has been my present stay in the naughty principality.

Up to yesterday. Ah, but yesterday!

Yesterday I—took to gambling again.

And to-day I had a long and intimate conversation with the friend of the Russian Ambassador—with the mysterious individual who travelled from Paris to Monaco with me, and who gave such a good guess at my character.

And now, "dere diry," let me tell you all about it. Yesterday morning I went over to the Hôtel des Anges to breakfast with the Picayunes, a pair of American love-birds whom I have just inspired with immoderate friendship. There were several people there I knew; among others Algy. But I should not have noted the festivity if it had not been that somebody suddenly found out that we were "thirteen at table," and Dora Picayune, who is fearfully superstitious, would not let us begin until we had got in a stray man to make up fourteen.

Then, after breakfast, and as we were all trooping out down the corridor, a tall, distinguished-looking man came out of No. 13. Partly because of the number being the one we had been talking about, and partly because the man's appearance was not only good but peculiar—he had hair white as snow, and a long jet black moustache—I asked Mr. Picayune if he knew him.

"Not personally," said my Yankee; "but I know who he is. He is a Pole, calls himself Prince Poniatowski, and gambles enormously at roulette."

That was nothing wonderfully extraordinary, you will say—here we all gamble; but what do you think of this, my gossip?

Just as I was enjoying my post-prandial cigarette last night, and was thinking of going through *un bain de toilette* for a "small and early" at Lady Carshalton's, in rushes Félicie with a horrified face.

"Well, Félicie?" I inquire between two puffs; "and what is the matter *now?* Is the hotel on fire, or what?"

"*Ah, mon Dieu, Madame!*" she cries, "*un sinistre affreux!* Figure to yourself that Monseigneur the Prince Poniatowski has just been brought into the hotel at the agony. He has made jump to himself the brains in the Casino. They bring him here because it is nearer than his hotel. It appears that he has suicided himself because he has ruined himself in putting more than a hundred times upon the No. 13 at the roulette!"

A suicide! No. 13 brought to my notice for the *third* time in one day by a suicide—that luckiest thing of all others to be connected with in any way (except as principal) when you want to try your luck! At least, they all say so here. Experienced gamblers will give almost any amount for a suicide's relic, as everybody knows. I cannot resist the temptation.

"Quick!" I cry, jumping up excitedly. "My cloak and my heaviest veil, Félicie. Quick! or I may be too late!"

Regardless of the astonishment I arouse in Félicie's inquiring mind, I hurry on my things. I empty my purse and put therein a thousand-franc note with which to tempt Fortune, and I rush down-stairs to the hall.

There I find that the Prince has been removed to an adjoining room; but I go up to the chair on which they had rested him, and furtively rub my thousand-franc note upon it. Then I flit over to the Casino, and soon am among the excited crowd at the roulette-table, at which the unfortunate Prince had been playing.

"Has the 13 come up yet?" I ask of an old hag, who is looking on with eager eyes, and keeping a faithful record of the play.

"No, madame," she says, "not once to-night. If I had a louis left I would try it myself."

And the old creature begins to try and wheedle the necessary coin out of my purse.

I quickly change my note, and boldly put down the maximum allowed by the administration upon the 13.

"*Le jeu est fait,*" says the croupier. "*Rien ne va plus!*"

A minute of intense anxiety passes slowly—oh, how slowly! The ball slackens in its swift course; it will soon stop. Nearer and nearer, on its last gyration does it come to 13. At last—it will never reach it—Yes! No! Yes!

"*Treize,*" says the croupier impassively, "*rouge impair et manque!*"

Hurrah! I have won six thousand francs. It is a pretty little *coup* enough; but, unfortunately, or fortunately, as the case may be, it has filled me with an insane confidence in my inspiration. The fever is on me now. I will work out the number.

I pick up my winnings, and repeat the operation with No. 1. You see, as 13 was brought to my notice *three* times, I cannot do less than try it in every way. I am moved by the spirit, therefore, to divide the figures, and try 1, with the full determination to follow it up with No. 3, if I am lucky enough to win.

My star is in the ascendant; I do win! I am so excited that it requires all my hardly-earned self-control to prevent me from shouting out loud, or cutting a caper.

With the utmost calmness, however, I gather up the *liasse* of notes that I have won, and again stake the maximum, this time upon the 3.

My neighbours are almost as excited as myself. But there is a dead silence as the ball is flung into the well, and the fatal words, "*rien ne va plus,*" sound through the room.

"*Le trois gagne!*" Glorious, magical words! I have won again.

I now proceed to back the colours. Sometimes I go on red and sometimes on black. But I always stake the maximum (six thousand francs), and my inspiration is never at fault.

* * * * * *

I have made my fortune!

But what is more—I have broken the bank! For after he has

paid me my last *coup*, the croupier rises and says:—"*Mesdames et messieurs, on ne jouera plus ce soir.*"

Even when it is a man who breaks the bank the sensation is immense. It furnishes conversation for at least a couple of days after. But when it is a "female woman" the sensation becomes a nine days' wonder. I find that I am the centre of an admiring—very much too admiring—throng. Notoriety is a great thing, no doubt; but it has its disadvantages. To begin with, I am distinctly being hustled, which I greatly object to; secondly, I do not wish to be recognized, and I feel morally certain that some evil fate will waft Algy hither before I can get out, although by this time he ought to be tripping in at Lady Carshalton's; thirdly, I have a very large sum of money in my hands, and I am horribly afraid somebody will take a fancy to it.

Just at that moment a voice sounded in my ear.

"Do not be alarmed, Mrs. Despard," it whispers; "I will take care of you, if you will allow me. Let us get out of the crowd through the gardens. I have an attendant here who will see that we are not followed."

I look round and recognize my bearish travelling companion, and the Russian Ambassador's friend, Monsieur Paul Dromiroff. Behind him stands the attendant he has just mentioned, a stalwart, swarthy foreigner of a pronounced Kalmuck type. He certainly looks quite able and willing to keep off any obnoxious followers, and I feel, somehow, that my new riches are safe, for the present. True, I do not know this Dromiroff from the proverbial Adam; but, somehow, I have confidence in him. True, I have seen him in intimate conversation with a diplomatic magnate of the first water; but it is not that; somehow, I feel intuitively that I may trust the man—that he is destined in some way to influence my future life.

So I bow a graceful assent, and take his proffered arm. Presently we are standing together in the moonlight, in a secluded part of the pleasaunce.

"And now," says M. Dromiroff, "now, my charming Mrs. Despard, to decide what we shall do with those three hundred thousand francs of yours."

"What we shall do with them?" I repeat, aghast.

"Yes, my dear madam," he replies imperturbably; "what shall we do with them?"

"I know what I am going to do with them," I answer; "take very good care of them. It is not every day that one gets a *coup* of this sort. I shall lock them up in my room to-night, and take them over to Nice in the morning and get some banker there to send them to England. I am not going to trust myself. I might be tempted to lose it all back."

"There you are wise," said the old man. "I thoroughly commend your prudence, but you are simply insane if you leave a sum of money of that magnitude in your room all night. *Grand Dieu!* Have you not seen enough of the denizens of Monte Carlo to realize the danger of such a course?"

What does the old gentleman mean? He surely does not intend to suggest that I should give my winnings to him to take care of! By Heaven! he does so, for almost immediately he says:—

"Be guided by me, my dear young lady; let me have charge of your money until to-morrow, when I will hand it over to you again; and, if you will permit me, I will escort you to Nice and see it placed in safe custody."

Somehow or other this speech makes me feel suspicious. I had reposed every confidence in the old Bear hitherto, but now I am filled with doubt with regard to the honesty of his intentions. After all, I know nothing of him, and the apparent interest he takes in me, and his solicitude for the safety of my money may very possibly be only a cloak to conceal some felonious intent. No, the money is safer with me than with anybody else.

"It is quite too kind of you," I say, "offering to put yourself to so much trouble, but I assure you that the money will be quite safe with me. I always lock my door at night, and I am certain that no one is in the least likely to rob me."

"Be it so, dear Madame Despard," he answers, "but recollect that I warned you."

He leaves me on the top of the steps at the hotel, and I must confess that at first I am troubled with an uneasy misgiving, but that soon passes away and I go to bed.

Félicie has heard of my good fortune, and although she does not know the enormous sum I have won, guesses that it is something considerable, and congratulates me effusively.

The reaction has now set in, and I feel worn and tired from the anxiety, excitement, and the tension of the nerves to which I have been subjected, so I soon dismiss her, and, having carefully locked up my money in my dressing case and my dressing case in the chest of drawers, I put the keys under my pillow and jump into bed. Although I am so fatigued, yet somehow or other I find that I cannot sleep. I light the candles and begin to read Guy de Maupassant's "*Une Vie*," which is too interesting and exciting to help me to court with any success the God of Slumber, and so I turn to Henri Greville's "*L'Ingénue*," which is dull and stupid enough to speedily effect the object I have in view. But it is all to no purpose. Sleep I cannot. Well, there is nothing for it but my dear chloral; and so, helping myself to a good dose, I am soon in delicious dreamland far away from all mundane troubles, hopes and fears, nor do I awake until Félicie has for a considerable time been beating a tattoo at my door. I get up and let her in, and having drunk my chocolate, it occurs to me to go and look at my money. I take my keys from under the pillow and soon reach my dressing case. Merciful Heavens, my money is gone!

* * * * * *

Picture my surprise, my horror, and that sickening feeling that comes over one in the presence of such a calamity. I am so aghast that for some considerable time I am perfectly incapable of coming to any determination with reference to the course I had better pursue and the means I ought to adopt in the endeavour to regain my money. The fact is that I can scarcely realize my awful loss. When at length I do take in the situation, I ring the bell violently, and, in few minutes, I have the whole of the officials of the hotel in my room. Some dozen individuals give as many different explanations; the manager expresses regret that I did not leave the money with him, and from his manner appears to doubt whether I have lost it at all. At least, that is the impression he conveys to my mind. However, there is nothing that can be done, and after a time they all leave me. Félicie, who is in floods of tears, attempts to comfort me between her sobs, but this has only the effect of irritating me still more, and I soon send her away.

I go down-stairs, and almost the first person I meet is Algy Balfour. He has heard the news, and bothers me with fifty stupid questions and a corresponding number of idiotic suggestions. Bored to death, I get rid of him by begging him to lose no time, and leave no stone unturned, in endeavouring to trace the money. He asks the amount, but there I equivocate, as I don't wish him to know as much as you, my diary, and I am quite aware that he can do no earthly good, and that I shall serve no good purpose by supplying him with the exact facts.

Then he goes, and cursing my fate, I walk quietly down towards the town of Monaco. I have not got far before I see a well-known figure coming in my direction. Yes, it is the Russian. I wonder if he can be of any use in this awful emergency.

"Well, Madame Despard—not gone over to Nice with your money?"

"For the best reason in the world—I have no money to go with. I have been robbed of every centime."

"I am not in the least surprised, madam; it is exactly what I foresaw. You will do me the justice to say that it is precisely what I foretold."

How maddening it is after a shock of this description for a person to preach "I told you so!"

"Yes; you were certainly a true prophet of evil," I say, sharply.

"Well, now I will be a prophet of good. I prophesy that you will recover your money."

"Do you really think that there is the least chance?" I ask, regaining some slight hope from his positive manner.

"I do," he says, "and I will assist you."

"But how can you help me? and what experience have you had in such matters?"

"I have had some slight experience," he replies. "I am the head of the Russian secret police."

"Head of the Russian secret police!" I exclaim. "That is the last thing I should have taken you for. And yet why not? Ever since I met you I have been racking my brain with fruitless conjectures as to your individuality. You have now solved the riddle, and at a singularly opportune moment. I have the utmost faith in your power to assist me. I thoroughly believe in you."

"You flatter me, Madame Despard," is all that he answers.

"It was too cruel to have made such a *coup*," I go on, "and then to have lost the fruit of one's marvellous fortune. It is once in a lifetime that one experiences such a triumph of chance as I did last night. I played like a true gambler, and boldly backed my luck, and was, as I deserved to be, rewarded for my courage, and now to lose all—it is too sickening!"

"It will teach you a lesson, Madame Despard," replies the Russian, "and that is not to imagine that you can go through this world independent of all assistance. Now, I placed my services at your disposal last night, but you would not avail yourself of them, and you see

the terrible result. Self-independence is not a bad attribute, but it may be carried too far. You are a most intelligent woman; you have great powers of intuition. You ought to have been able to have seen that I was to be trusted."

"My dear friend, I know that I ought; but forgive me, and help me if you can. Surely I have been sufficiently punished."

"I think you have, my dear lady," he says; "here is your money!"

Then he produces a vast pocket-book, and in it are my lost bank-notes.

"Count them," he says, "and tell me if they are correct."

I do so mechanically, and reply in the affirmative. I am almost speechless with surprise and excitement, but, oh, so glad! It is almost worth while to have gone through the agony of the loss to experience the joy of the restoration. When I am myself again, and have sufficiently recovered from the shock and strain on my nerves, I ask for an explanation.

"How does it signify, dear Madame Despard, in what way you have again become the mistress of your little fortune? There is the fact, and you are only to be congratulated."

"Yes, I know; but think of my curiosity. You, who have been such a benefactor, will, I am sure, add to the vast obligation under which you have placed me by telling me how you have so wonderfully come to my rescue."

"I have possibly been your benefactor; at any rate, that has been my intention," he replies, "but in a way that you little imagine, and which in all probability you will fail to appreciate. You wish to know how, in spite of all your precautions, your money was abstracted last night, and how it has been recovered by me?"

"Yes!"

"The latter portion of your inquiry is solved by my answer to the former. I gave orders for your apartment to be visited last night, and your property has always remained in my charge."

"How dare you do such a thing? How dare you play such a cruel practical joke on me?" I say, justly indignant.

"Pray calm yourself, charming Madame Despard," answers the old Russian, coolly; "it was all done for your good. I merely wanted to show you in a practical form the power that *nous autres* possess, and that for an important object."

"And the object?"

"Merely that I want you to join our ranks. It will be a good thing for us and a good thing for you. I am not a philanthropist. I am not actuated solely by a desire to benefit you, but I fully recognize the value of the services of a woman of your type, and I want to secure them."

"I could not entertain such a proposition for a single instant," I reply.

"Not if it was made very tempting?"

"Under no circumstances could I do so."

"Reflect; there is no hurry for your decision."

"If I reflected until Doomsday, my decision would be the same. No, no, no!"

"There is nothing the least derogatory in accepting such a position," he argues. "Many members of our oldest families, many individuals with historical names, are enrolled in our fraternity. Do as I ask, and existence will at last have some interest for you, Your life is being wasted. You are capable of great things, and I should like to assist in moulding your destiny."

"I am quite content with things as they are," I answer; "I have had quite enough intrigue in the world, and all I want now is quiet and peace of mind."

"How little you know yourself!" he says. "Just fancy your tolerating a *bourgeois* existence for six months. I could as well imagine a hawk mating with a dove, a cat with a mouse."

"It is useless saying anything more about it," I reply. "My mind is made up."

"You will alter your mind one day," he says, "and then you had better write to me. This will always find me," he continues, giving me a card with an address at St. Petersburg on it.

I take it and bid him good-bye. Then I make my way to the station as quickly as possible, and take the train to Nice, where I deposit my money with a banker with instructions to remit it to England. I am not going to give Monsieur Blanc's successors the chance of getting it back from me. I meet Algy at the Nice station when I am returning to Monte Carlo. He appears rather cool in his manner, and so I treat him with corresponding *froideur*. He asks why I have come over to Nice, and I tell him. He questions me most minutely with reference to the recovery of my money, but I merely say that the police have succeeded in tracing it and restoring it to me.

I don't want Algy to know too much about my *vieux Russe*. Poor Algy is very unsuspicious, and accepts all my statements with a faith that is positively touching. He warms a little before we reach Monte Carlo, and we arrange to dine at eight in the restaurant of the Hôtel de Paris.

It is past that hour when we walk into the room, and, large as it is, every table seems crowded. At last the head waiter finds us a place, and I quietly survey the scene. It is indeed a strange mixture; there is a *cocotte* elbowing an English duchess, a money-lender's tout dining with a peer, my old Russian and his friend the Ambassador, and a heterogeneous mass of all tongues, nations, and languages, people with reputations and people without, a babel of voices chiefly discussing the recent successes and failures at the tables, and the plans and systems for breaking the bank; and there is, good Heavens! at the table just behind me, with beaming countenance and eyes full of mischief, the man I least of all wished to meet in Monte Carlo—the man of all

others that it is expedient for me to avoid, at any rate for the present —although I am dying to speak to him. Yes, there is no mistaking him—it is Lord Udolpho Daysey!

* * * * * *

There is no doubt about it. It *is* Lord Udolpho Daysey, and no other man, "as large as life and twice as natural." And I do think that an apparition of his Satanic Majesty himself, horns, hoofs, brimstone, and all, would be a less perturbing sight to me just now than the presence of the extremely handsome young aristocrat at yonder table.

I do not mean to say that the impression his unexpected appearance produces upon me is wholly disagreeable. Far from it. I have already confessed to you, my old gossip, that I conceived a sort of sneaking kindness for the "noble lord" at first sight, despite myself. Under other circumstances I should be delighted to see him. If Algy Balfour were not here, I should most undoubtedly afford him every opportunity of making acquaintance with me. But Algy *is* here, and there is no knowing what Lord Dolly might not be able to let out, and there certainly is no knowing how Algy might take the information. For I suspect that Algy has under his *blasé* exterior a very hot temper of his own; and I quite believe that, after having been jilted so cruelly (as he thinks) by Miss Vyse, he would not hesitate to throw aside Lena Despard like a rotten apple if he chanced to find anything wrong at the core. My *rôle* with him is that of the faithful friend who can sympathize with his troubles, having herself been hardly dealt with. Let him but suspect one quarter of the truth, and my chance with him is ruined for ever. "There is many a slip between the cup and the lip," I know; but it would be cruel indeed to have got the tempting cup so near one's dry lips, and to have it snatched away just as one opened them to drink. Is it not Shakespeare who says in one

place, "He ten times pines that pines beholding food;" and in another, "'Tis double death to drown in ken of shore?" Well, then, them's my sentiments, and a great deal better put than people talk now-a-days.

All this flits through my mind in the space of about a second. It takes me just another second to deliberate as to whether I shall boldly accept Lord Dolly's challenge and acknowledge his acquaintance, or whether I shall brave his wrath, and look at him as if I had never seen him before. But Algy has caught sight of him.

"Do you know that fellow?" he says at last, fumbling for his eye-glass, which he is always losing; "he is staring at you as if he expected you to bow to him."

"Oh, is he?" I answer, carelessly fanning myself, and lying back in my chair with easy *nonchalance*. "The face is familiar enough to me—I suppose I have seen him in the Park, or Hurlingham, or somewhere; but I am quite sure I don't know the man's name."

Algy has found his glass by this time, and is fixing it in his eye, preparatory to glaring at his compatriot in the aggressive way which Englishmen affect in looking at each other. It is certainly not so offensive as the withering contempt with which they *toisent* a foreigner; but it is decidedly hostile, nevertheless.

"Why, it's Dolly Daysey," he exclaims. "I met him at Cowes last August, aboard old Hornblower's yacht. Don't you know him? Most people do, I fancy."

I proceed to deny the soft impeachment, and this time with some vigour, for I notice that Algy has nodded to my dangerous admirer. My well-meant efforts are, however, in vain. The astute Dolly has seized upon his opportunity, and is wending his way towards us through the crowded tables.

"Hullo, Balfour!" he cries, heartily. "Whoever would have thought of finding *you* here, so early in the season?"

And he nearly shakes Algy's hand off, as if Algy were his best

friend, and he were meeting him again after an absence of ten years at the very least.

"I might return the compliment, I think," says Algy, extricating his hand, and smoothing it down. "Thought you went in for nothing but hunting, you know. You ought to be at Melton Mowbray, or somewhere like that, by rights."

Why on earth do men nearly always say "huntin'" and "yachtin'," I wonder? They don't talk of "somethin'" and "nothin'," or complain of a horse's "kickin'," or praise a partner's "valsin'." But I am "digressin'."

"I don't know where I ought to be," laughs Dolly. "I only know that I'm precious glad I'm here, as I understand it's freezing hard in the shires. And I may add"—looking straight into my eyes—"that I am all the gladder, as I fancy I have the pleasure of this lady's acquaintance."

Algy, who has already repented his ill-advised nod, frowns, and shakes his head.

"She says she don't know you," he whispers, gruffly.

"Introduce me, then," whispers Dolly, persistently.

"Perhaps she wouldn't like it," returns Algy, getting quite annoyed. "Better wait till after dinner. Well, good-bye for the present. We can't stop whispering here, you know."

All this time I am sipping at my champagne, and nibbling at some *marrons glacés*, with the greatest "coolth." (A word of my own. We say "warm"—"warmth;" why not "cool"—"coolth?") I have made up my mind to be guided by events. And I have not long to wait. The event occurs almost immediately.

"I see I must appeal to you in person," continues the unabashed Dolly, addressing himself directly to me. "It is perfectly true, isn't it? I *was* introduced to you once, wasn't I?" And, as I still hesitate a moment: "It was in *Paris*, wasn't it, *Mrs. Robinson?* Let me see, I

can even remember the name of your hotel, if I try. Wasn't it the Hôtel——?"

"My name is not *Robinson*," I interrupt, hurriedly; "and I am *quite sure* it was not in *Paris* you were introduced to me. But I know your face quite well. I have no doubt we have met in society somewhere. At all events"—with a gracious smile—"that is very easily arranged. Mr. Balfour, why don't you introduce your friend?"

"Oh, certainly! if you *wish* it," growls Algy. "Lord Udolpho Daysey—Mrs. Despard."

"It almost reminds me," says Dolly, annexing a chair from an adjoining table, and sitting down at my side, "of the two Oxford undergrads; the one looking on at the other drowning in Sandford Lasher, and refusing to save him *because they had not been introduced.* Now, Mrs. Despard, you saw me perishing in the dismal solitude of my table out there, and yet you would not save me because I had not been introduced."

"Don't you think that your dinner will be getting cold?" says Algy, almost rudely.

"But now I *have* been introduced," pursues milord, without noticing his friend's interruption, "I intend to improve the occasion; if not just now, as I see you have done your dinner, at all events later on. By the way, what are you going to do with yourselves to-night?"

We have as yet made no plans for the evening.

"We are going to hear Judic in 'Un Mari Vierge,'" Algy has the impudence to answer. "I have got two stalls in the third row, the only ones that were left in the theatre."

"Oh, indeed!" says Dolly, with a curious grin. "Then I suppose there's no chance for me? But, of course, you'll have a shy at the tables afterwards? Which do you patronize, Mrs. Despard—roulette or trente-et-quarante?"

"Mrs. Despard never plays," interposes my protector, before I can

speak. "The associations at the tables are not fit for Mrs. Despard. And, as for me, I have made up my mind to give up gambling altogether."

"Oh, indeed!" says Dolly, as before; "sorry I spoke. Well, ta-ta, Balfour. I'll go and finish my dinner. Good evening, Mrs. Despard. So glad to have made your acquaintance—at last."

And he "returns to his muttons," or, more probably, to some delicate *entrée*, which is getting cold. That does not seem to matter much to him, for he attacks it, whatever it is, with a will. I observe, however, that he takes the precaution of filling a large tumbler with champagne and gulping it off before he begins.

"My dear Mr. Balfour," I say, after a pause, during which my companion has sat moodily silent, "how *could* you tell such a *dreadful* fib? You know perfectly well we never even *thought* of going to see Judic to-night. We were debating as to whether we should go to Lady Minerva's dance, or to the private theatricals on board Mrs. Rollin Stone's steam yacht."

"Just so," answered Algy; "and as Lord Dolly was very probably going to both, I thought it best to put him off the scent as to *our* intentions."

"But I thought you were such *intimate* friends," I urge; "at all events, you brought him over to our table."

"Brought him over to our table!" repeats Algy, indignantly; "I simply nodded to him, like I should in the street. He could see I had a lady with me whom he didn't know. If I had thought he would have had the cheek to come over here, and force his acquaintance on you, I would have seen him further first before I saw him at all."

"But what is your objection to him?" I persist. "I have heard of him before, and always as one of the best set. And he is very nice, and gentlemanly, and—and well-dressed." I was going to say "distractingly handsome," but I do not want to rouse my Algy's

jealousy; at all events, not before the settlements are signed, and the wedding-breakfast is digested.

"My objection to him," says Algy, doggedly, "is the same that I have against a good many men of his class. It is simply this. He belongs to the best set, as you say; but, at the same time, he has some deuced shady acquaintances. I don't say a word against him personally; but I happen to know that he is very thick with Captain Fortinbras, and all that lot, and that is quite enough for me. Lord Udolpho Daysey may be 'very nice,' but he is certainly not a man whom I should like you to admit to your intimacy."

I am inclined to think from Algy's present possessive attitude towards me on most such occasions as these, that there are very few men indeed whom he *would* "like me to admit to my intimacy."

"But aren't you just a little prejudiced," I am stupid enough to say, "against that poor Captain Fortinbras? He is a bad lot, certainly —a *very* bad lot, I daresay. But a younger son has so much to contend with when he is thrown on the world. Brought up expensively, he finds himself without means to live as he has been accustomed. Ought not *some* allowance to be made for——?"

"My opinion of '*poor*' Captain Fortinbras," interrupts Algy, who has been chafing under my ill-timed defence of my old ally, "is so bad that I should not hesitate to decline the acquaintance of any woman—even you—who had ever been intimate with him. You, Mrs. Despard, have met him. If I thought Jack Fortinbras had the right to call himself a friend of yours, I should leave your presence, now—this moment—never to seek it again!"

He has worked himself up into a regular passion. He is speaking very quickly, and smiling as he speaks, but his eyes are flashing with a lurid light, and he evidently must thoroughly mean what he says.

"A *friend* of mine, indeed!" I say, with dignity. "That, Mr.

Balfour, is *quite* impossible after the story you told me in London one day. I did meet him, casually, in society long ago. I pity him; but I know nothing more of him than what you yourself have told me."

After this colossal crammer I rise to go; and, with a gracious little smile and bow to Dolly (the more gracious from the fact that Algy is not looking), I leave the room, congratulating myself upon having effectually bound the said Dolly to my interests. I don't think he will "split" on me now.

Outside, Mr. Balfour and I hold a council of war. We finally decide to go first to Mrs. Rollin Stone's private theatricals, and afterwards to Lady Minerva's dance at the Villa Mezzomonte. The yacht's boats are in waiting at the little pier, and we are soon on the snowy deck of the *Loreley*. Our hostess is a somewhat vulgar American, but she is fabulously rich, hospitality personified, and is possessed of a great fund of originality. It is no wonder, therefore, that when the theatricals, which are decidedly above the average, come to an end amidst a storm of aristocratic applause, and a *cotillon* is promised us after supper, Algy and I elect to let Lady Minerva "slide," and to finish up the night on deck.

It is just half-past three in the morning when I say "good-bye" to Algy on the steps of the Hôtel de Paris. He has had quite enough champagne, and tries to kiss me; but I evade his advances artfully and virtuously, and run quickly up to my own rooms.

I have a suite, consisting of a dining-room, a boudoir, a bed-room, and a dressing-room. Félicie is generally to be found sitting at the dining-room table fast asleep when I return late, but to-night she is not to be seen. There lies, instead, a sheet of note-paper on the table:

"*Madame,—Je suis désolée, mais je n'y tiens plus. J'ai une migraine affreuse, accompagnée de vomissements. Je vais me coucher.*

"FÉLICIE BATACLAN."

So Félicie has got a sick-headache, and has gone to bed? Very annoying, to-night especially, as I am tired out. Well, I suppose I must undress myself somehow. I go into the boudoir, and find the lamp there, burning low, on the table by the sofa. I suppose Félicie has been reading, for the last new novel—'Séducteur ou Séductrice'—lies open on the ground. I turn up the lamp.

To my horror, something stretches itself on the sofa and yawns.

To my horror and alarm, that something turns out to be a man.

To my horror, alarm, and a confused jumble of other feelings, that man turns out to be Lord Udolpho Daysey!

CHAPTER XV.

'Taint Fair, but I am made to Play.

"Il n'y a de bête en amour que les gens d'esprit: les sots sont bien plus malins."
"Pourquoi?"
"Parce que l'amour est une maladie qui affaiblit les premiers et surexcite les seconds."

MY late respected father, "dere diry," was a Low Church clergyman of the most pronounced type. He certainly gave his daughters a first-rate home-education, good food and lodging, and plenty of out-door exercise; but as he objected, without exception, to every form of social enjoyment, we did not even know the meaning of the word "pleasure" until we were emancipated from his control by matrimony. My three sisters are all dead, so they cannot give their opinion about the husbands he chose for them; but, for my part, I will say that his religion must have been largely diluted by worldly considerations when he gave my reluctant hand to my first husband, Mr. Molyneux—a man whom I could not love, who had notoriously sown a large crop of wild oats, and whose only recommendation as a suitor was his ancient name and the heavy rent-roll connected with his estates.

The author of my days was, in particular, never weary of descanting at intolerable length upon the virtues of the Commonwealth as opposed to the vices of the Restoration. I have since, however, heard it argued with considerable force that the dissipated tendencies of Merry England

under Charles II. were chiefly due to the systematic repression of all kinds of amusements, even the most innocent, by the advisers of His Highness the Lord Protector Cromwell. I am more inclined to adhere to this view of the question, inasmuch as, in my own case, I attribute the *dévergondage* which has been discovered (and sternly rebuked) in my present disposition, to the Reign of Terror under which I groaned during the whole of my girlhood.

To the puritanical views of my father I owe, however, some proficiency in a study which is not much affected by my sister-*mondaines*. His direst *anathema maranatha* was, I think, reserved for the stage and everything connected therewith. Play-actors and playwrights he held in equal abhorrence. But by some curious mental process he had come to exempt Shakespeare from the general excommunication; and a fine copy of the "Divine William" held an honoured place next the Family Bible in his voluminous but soporific library. One day I happened to take the great dramatist down by mistake, and the pictures in the Sacred Volume ceased from that moment to possess any interest for me.

From that day my chief pleasure was my stolen hour in the company of Romeo or Othello, Lady Macbeth or Rosalind. I became an ardent Shakespearian student (perhaps because I had nothing more frivolous to read—but not altogether for that reason), and I have not yet forgotten quite all I knew, although I have only dipped into my old friend and consoler by fits and starts since my wedding-day.

Which accounts, *cher journal*, for the occasional quotations from the Bard of Avon with which I adorn your pages.

Which brings me back, moreover, "to my muttons," though by a somewhat circuitous and lengthy road. That, however, matters little, as the only person who will ever be deeply bored or moderately interested by this scribble is—myself.

When I caught sight of Lord Udolpho Daysey opposite me in the Restaurant of the Hôtel de Paris, my equanimity was certainly a good

deal disturbed. There was the very likely possibility of his "turning nasty" at the sight of my apparent felicity, and doing his best to mar it. It upset me much.

Now, however, that I find that promising young noble on the sofa in my boudoir at nearly four a.m.; now that there is not only the possibility but the extreme probability of *esclandre*, exposure, and scandal, not to mention suspicion and rupture when it comes to Algy's ears; now that the danger is no longer imminent, but present; now that I am face to face with the enemy—I find myself calm, collected, and eager for the fray.

There is no need for anyone to say to me—

> "Screw your courage to the sticking place;"

for no sudden crisis has ever yet shaken my presence of mind.

> "By how much unexpected, by so much
> We must awake endeavour for defence;
> For courage mounteth with occasion."

Before the sacrilegious intruder has had time to breathe a word, I walk back quietly but swiftly into the dining-room, and, going to the door, turn the key in the lock and put it into my pocket. I adopt this somewhat incomprehensible course for two reasons:—First, to prevent anybody surprising us in the midst of the interview which milord has so shamelessly forced upon me; secondly, to prevent the possibility of his putting that key into *his* pocket.

I return to the boudoir. Dolly is wide awake by this time, and is coolly turning over the leaves of my album.

"You are rather late, aren't you, Mrs. Despard?" he says, with the utmost *aplomb* as I stand at the door glaring at him; "I have been waiting for you nearly two hours."

I vouchsafe no answer but a wrathful snort to this intensely impertinent remark.

"You do not speak," he continues; "you look angry, or upset. Which is it, *belle dame sans merci?*"

Again I confine my observations to an indignant silence. I am trying to devise some plan of getting the wretch out of the hotel without connecting my name with his prompt departure.

"You look distractingly pretty to-night," he says, after a pause. "That dress suits you down to the ground." And then, in injured tones—"It was very cruel of you to keep me waiting so long."

I sink into an arm-chair, and begin fanning myself.

"May I ask, Lord Udolpho," I begin, in my most dulcet tones, "to what extraordinary circumstance I owe the honour of so matutinal a visit from you?"

"Matutinal visit?" he repeats, as if surprised at the question. "Why, my dear Mrs. Despard, to your gracious condescension, I suppose."

"Is this a practical joke?" I inquire, calmly; "because, if so, I must inform you that I simply abominate practical jokes."

"Practical joke!" he repeats as before. "I will answer your question by another. Do you mean to say you did not *expect to find me here?*"

This is almost too much; but, somehow or other, I manage to keep my temper.

"You are pleased to be facetious, sir," I retort; "but as I, at least, have not been drinking this evening, be good enough to open a pint bottle of champagne, which you will find in the next room, and to bring it to me here."

He goes off obediently enough. "Now's your time!" the typical British matron would say. "Save your virtue by flight. Fling the outer key after him; rush into your bedroom; lock and bolt yourself in; scream the house down! and you are safe!" But not so, Lena Despard.

Before he goes I must find out how he got in without being observed; also, how he is to get out without being observed. Also, how much he really does know about me, and how far that knowledge

is safe in his hands. So when he comes back, with the open bottle and a tumbler in his hand, he finds me in the same position, and still quietly fanning myself.

"Now, Lord Udolpho Daysey," I say, holding out the glass to be filled, "you will kindly sit down and tell me, in as few words as possible, your exact purpose in forcing yourself upon my company in the small hours of the morning. And then you will tell me how you propose to get out of the hotel without compromising my reputation. And then you will go, that very moment. That will just give me time to finish my little refreshment."

He sits down in silence, and looks at me for a full minute without speaking. He certainly is very good at feigning surprise. I fancy he is taking time to make up his story. But he will be very clever if he can invent even a *possible* lie.

"You have asked me for two pieces of information, Mrs. Despard," he says, sitting down at the table, "which I should have thought you already possessed. However, that is none of *my* business. You have chosen to pretend ignorance on the subject. So be it. *Vous en avez bien le droit.* I bow to your desire, and begin at the beginning."

He is speaking very quietly, but evidently with strong suppressed emotion. It *was* rather cruel of me to suggest he was tipsy.

"My exact purpose," he continues, "in forcing myself upon you to-night I cannot tell you; for the simple reason that I did *not* 'force myself' in here, or ever dream of such a thing. I am not quite so bad as that, indeed. No; it was like this."

He stops a moment, looks at me searchingly, and then proceeds.

"When you two left the Café, you bowed to me so graciously that I was silly enough to take it as a direct invitation to follow you to the theatre. No; hear me out! You know yourself that Algy Balfour is not the liveliest of companions. Well, I hurried over my dinner, rushed across to the theatre, and, to my great surprise and pleasure, found a

stall vacant next those Balfour had said he had secured for you. You remember he told me they were the only ones left. Well, you were not there, of course; but I was expecting you every moment, when to my horror two fat Germans plumped down next me. I told them the seats belonged to some friends of mine. They showed me their *coupons.* What could I think? I could only come to the conclusion that you had preferred a box at the last moment; so I waited on till nearly the end of the piece in the hope of seeing you. Then it suddenly struck me that you had changed your mind altogether. Off I went to the tables; inspected every face present; ascertained that you were not *there.* 'Fool that I am,' I thought; 'Mrs. Despard is at Lady Minerva's, of course!' Off I went to Lady M.'s—no Mrs. Despard! My last resource would have been the American theatricals; but I wanted to see you so much and I was afraid of our crossing each other. So I came back here, and, when I had ascertained you had not yet come in, I ordered a B. and S., and sat in the porch smoking, and waiting just to have the pleasure of saying 'Good-night' to you."

"A very long and roundabout exordium," I remark, dryly; "but as yet I have heard nothing to the point. Pray come to the point immediately."

"That's what I am about to do!" he exclaims, flashing an angry look at me. Here is the point, so listen! I happened to have to cross the hall to get my cigar-case filled, when I noticed one of the chambermaids making signs that were unmistakably intended for me. So I went towards her, casually enough, and then she beckoned me down a deserted corridor."

"I trust," interrupting scornfully, "that you are not trying to put the blame on to my maid, Félicie. For, though I can't say I believe you now, if you tried *that* on, I should look upon you as the most barefaced liar in Europe. I have the very fullest confidence in Félicie."

"Félicie? Oh, dear no!" he says airily, and with a curious smile;

"I made Félicie's acquaintance in Paris, at the Hôtel Marsollier. She is pale and dark, as most Parisiennes are. This one was fair and pink, like Germans and Northerners generally."

"Well, and what did the woman say?" I inquire, becoming interested in spite of my smouldering wrath.

"She asked me if I wanted to see you to-night privately, and then, if I would make it worth her while, to get me a private interview, saying that it would have to be awfully artfully managed, as you were terribly afraid of being—well, of—of scandal."

"How *can* you invent such horrid lies?" I burst out.

"They are *not* lies!" he retorts, doggedly; "it is the truth, on my soul! Well, I believed naturally enough that you had put her up to it; and so I gave her a 100fr. note, and promised her another if it came off. Then she took me up to an empty room at the end of your corridor——"

"Now, I *know* it's a lie!" I interrupt, beside myself; "the hotel is crammed to the ceiling. People were turned away this very evening!"

"I can only say that I was in No. 35 for half-an-hour to-night, and that it was as empty as possible," he answers; "you can see for yourself if you like. Well, she told me to stop there, as Félicie was waiting up for you. But Félicie always drank black coffee to keep her awake, so she (this woman) would put some stuff in her coffee to make her sick, and so get rid of her. Then I was to be fetched in here, and wait for you. Which duly happened. And I swear I thought you fully expected to find me here!"

This tallies somewhat with Félicie's dolorous note. But still I cannot believe in such an improbable story. Most likely he has been reading the note, and has invented a story to fit it.

"And how on earth," I inquire severely, "did this woman of yours get the stuff into Félicie's coffee?"

"I'm sure I don't know," he says meekly; "all I know is that her last words to me were: 'When you go out, say you have been playing baccarat up in 72. There is a large party on there.' And then she disappeared. And that is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—so help me God!"

I can't help laughing for the life of me—he says it so solemnly. Am I to believe him or not? No, I don't think I can. What possible reason could this German chambermaid have for supposing I would tolerate the presence of a man, even a friend, at this hour in my rooms? None whatever! My conduct here, at least, has been immaculate.

"You are laughing, Mrs. Despard," he cries, joyously; "come, am I forgiven? Say you believe what I have told you."

"No, I don't believe a word of it!" I exclaim; "but I will do you the credit of acknowledging that you have accounted for your presence most ingeniously. And now I have finished my champagne, so you will please go at once. Don't forget to say that you have been playing baccarat in 72."

"Go at once?" he repeats, settling himself in an arm-chair. "I don't intend to go for an hour yet."

"Leave the room at once—*at once*," I cry furiously.

"Oh no, Mrs. Despard," he drawls; "*j'y suis, j'y reste.* You see I happen to be madly in love with you. I can guess that you are engaged or as good as engaged to that pompous prig of a Balfour. Well, though I am not rich enough to offer myself in exchange for him, I can at all events treat myself to the pleasure of an hour's chat with you to-night. Desperate men adopt desperate expedients. Grant me what I ask, just one short hour now, *le temps de fumer un cigare;* be kind to me when I meet you in public; and I am your friend, your champion for life. Refuse me, and you will rue it; you will have no bitterer enemy than I!"

"What, threats?" I laugh, contemptuously. "This is as good as a melodrama. Lord Udolpho Daysey, if you do not go this instant, I will have you turned out neck and crop by the porters!"

"In that case," he answers, coolly, "I shall confide your relations with Jack Fortinbras, ex-captain in H.M.S., to Mr. Algernon Balfour no later than to-morrow morning."

"Algy knows all about it," I cry. "Besides, if you *did* know anything (which I say is impossible), where are your proofs?"

"Here is one," he says, opening his pocket-book; "a letter from the great Jack to Mrs. Despard (whom he calls 'dear Lena'), asking her to call at the Albany one morning. I found that letter on the floor in his chambers. You dropped it. I picked it up, having seen Mrs. Despard and admired her when she was dining in a private room at Romano's with the same Jack. I kept it, thinking it might come in useful some day. We had better be *friends*, hadn't we, dear Mrs. Despard?"

All that Algy said about Jack at dinner to-night surges up in my recollection with horrid clearness. I am *lost* unless I conciliate Dolly. I suddenly come to a decision.

"Lord Udolpho," I say, quietly, "are you a gentleman?"

"If being a gentleman is to leave you now," he replies, "I am not! In all else, however, I believe I am."

"Well, then," I continue, "if you will give me your word of honour to go the moment one hour is over by that clock; and that you will never breathe a word of this to any living soul, *even if we should quarrel*, you may have a drink, smoke a cigarette, and play me a game of ecarté, if you like!"

And so the matter ends; he keeps his word to the letter. We play three or four close games, and when he departs I allow him to kiss my hand. It is better to have friends than enemies, is it not?

CHAPTER XVI.

Landed.

Hôtel de Paris, Monte Carlo, December.

SINCE my adventure the other evening with Lord Dolly, that young gentleman has appeared to avoid me. Possibly he may be a little ashamed of his outrageous behaviour; probably not, for I should imagine that he must be thoroughly hardened and unscrupulous, or he could never have acted as he did. Anyhow, I am certain that he keeps out of my way, and I am equally certain that my equanimity is not thereby disturbed.

For much as I like Dolly *au fond*, I have not the slightest intention of being diverted one hair's-breadth from the great object of my life, that is, becoming the wife of Algy Balfour.

Algy has said nothing really definite, but I cannot fail to notice the unmistakable signs of his growing affection. Every time I am with him I seem to feel that he is on the eve of putting me out of my suspense, and asking me to marry him. But, somehow or other, it never quite comes to this. The month is drawing to a close, Christmas is over, and the New Year will soon be here, and I seem to be no further advanced in my laudable undertaking. I live, too, in daily dread of some mutual acquaintances of Algy's and mine putting an appearance on the scene, and spoiling my game by some awful disclosure or officious warning to my intended husband.

I have tried warmth, and I have tried coldness; but neither effusion

of sentiment nor yet the starving-out system quite brings him to the point, and as far as any solid fruits of victory go, I am no nearer the citadel than when I commenced my attack.

But one day, the last of the year, we go over to Nice together. We breakfast at the London House; we drive most of the afternoon, and Algy is kindness itself. I am correspondingly gracious, and I consequently succeed in amusing him, and making myself more necessary to him than ever. We dine at one of the hotels, and, between nine and ten, make our way to the station, *en route* for Monte Carlo. About a couple of hundred yards before we reach it, Algy's shoe-lace becomes untied and he stops to tie it up, while I walk quietly on. Suddenly, two men, who look like Spaniards, cross the road; one of them says something to me that I do not understand, and the other puts his arm round my waist and tries to embrace me.

I give one shriek, which brings Algy to my side in a second. He seizes hold of my assailant, and holds him by the collar like a vice, asking him in French—which, if not very correct, has, at any rate, been rendered fluent by his excitement—asking him, I say, what he means by insulting a lady. The man struggles violently, and mutters some incomprehensible oaths. Thereupon his companion, in a weak moment, is foolish enough to strike Algy with his cane. The latter drops his man, and then goes for the pair of them in genuine British style, the result being that in about half a minute both of them are knocked down, and when they get up, are knocked down again. They then appear to realize the fact that they have caught a Tartar, and commence howling for mercy. Algy bestows a parting kick on the one nearest to him, and, making me take his arm, contemptuously leaves them.

"How can I ever thank you?" I say.

"Good Heavens! there is nothing to thank me for. I could have killed the brutes for insulting you."

"What should I have done if I had not had you to protect me?"

"Let me protect you always, darling," he replies; "I love you with all my heart. Be my wife."

"My dear love," is all I say.

And so at last it is settled, and my great *coup* is landed, or rather is on the eve of being landed, for until the marriage has absolutely taken place I am never safe. A woman with a past like mine may, at any moment, have her prospect marred by one of the enemies that she must necessarily have made, or, still more probably, by "some damned good-natured friend."

It is the *Jour de l'An*, and I have risen early, after a naturally sleepless night. I am sitting at the open window, and looking at the Alpes Maritimes and the tideless Mediterranean. I am congratulating myself upon my extraordinary good fortune, when suddenly my eyes wander to the table, and there I see a letter which escaped my notice on the previous evening. I take it up, and find that it is from Jack Fortinbras. Imagine my feelings on reading it.

Albany, December 29th.

"DEAR LENA,—As you never write, I suppose that you have got on some good game of your own which you think it advisable to keep to yourself. I am afraid, however, that I cannot gratify your natural, but, at the same time, lamentably selfish, propensity for monopolizing all the good things of this world. I have just returned to town from Denston Park. I find that I can make no impression upon the little Vyse, so I have made up my mind to waste no more time in that direction. And as there was no money to be got hold of in the country, I determined to come back to London, and so here I am. Here I am, dear Lena, but not for long. You don't seem likely to come here, and so I have determined to come to you. You may expect me about the 4th or 5th. I shall stop at the Hôtel de Paris, as I hate all the rest. Ask them to keep a room. I will take it from the 4th. I dare say

Monte Carlo is full, and I don't want to be running from one hotel to another on my arrival.

"Good-bye, my dear. I hope you have got hold of something really good.

"Yours always,

"JACK."

Merciful Heavens! Jack coming here to spoil all my chances and hopes for a happy future. There is only one thing to be done, and there is not a moment to be lost. Algy and I must at once leave Monte Carlo.

* * * * * *

"The next morning, as Angelina's heavy, delicately blue-veined eyelids slowly lifted and revealed the azure depths of her languorous sapphirine eyes, she felt her whole being permeated by an inexpressible sense of well-being—by an inexplicable feeling of most utter satisfaction. The matutinal song of the innocent and gladsome skylark impinged upon her delighted ear with a blitheness which was new to her; the rays of the rising sun poured into her chamber with a radiance which they had never possessed before; the balmy breath of the strong salt savour of the sea stirred her pure white dimity curtains with a sweetness which up to this blissful dawn had never rustled their chaste folds. In a word, Angelina was awake; and she was awake to the consciousness that she was beloved by Ferdinand de Bar—a man whose vast rent-roll and strict adherence to the tenets of the Church of England promised her a wedded life of unalloyed happiness."

It is something in this style that the chapter usually begins which follows next upon a description of an advantageous matrimonial offer in the contemporary British novel. That is, if my memory serves me aright. For it is now quite a long time since I eschewed for good and all the perusal of those enthralling accounts, in three volumes, of the inception, progress, and ultimate result of a betrothal in modern society. The

highest praise which a critic can bestow upon them when they have merit (which is not often) is that they are an accurate portrayal of nineteenth century manners and customs; and it is for that very reason that I cannot endure them. I suppose these effusions are called "novels" on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle—because they are padded with such well-worn matter. I know all about our insular habits. When I read I want something fresh—the description of something that is not absolutely familiar to me.

In any case, however, I am sorry to say that the stereotyped opening of *Chapter i., Vol. iii.*, will not do for the analysis of my state of mind when I woke *this* morning any more than it would yesterday. To begin with, I have been dreaming heavily, impossibly, and fretfully all night. At least half-a-dozen times I have started into wakefulness, unable to recollect my dream, but trembling all over from its effects. The result is, that I have a splitting headache.

My temples are throbbing madly; and it is in vain that I try to fall asleep again, even at the risk of going through more "fearful dreams and ugly sights."

I feel dimly aware that some important change has taken place in my life. I seem, indeed, almost to be labouring already under the shadow of my future respectability; but everything is very hazy in me this morning, and it does not occur to me to think of Algy at all.

Coming to a sudden determination, I tumble out of bed somehow, and make for the washing-stand, where I give my rebellious head a good ducking in cold water. Then I slip on a wrapper and slippers, and open the windows, and establish myself in a lounging chair on the balcony.

In a very few minutes I feel distinctly better; and when Félicie makes her appearance with my *café au lait* and *pistolets*, I am able to tell her to order more coffee and some *pâté de foie gras*, as I purpose going out for a walk, before breakfasting at the restaurant.

The fact is, that I feel the necessity of communing with myself, of laying my plans against Jack's arrival, of coming to some conclusion as to the best course to adopt with Dolly; and I can always *think* better out of doors than in. Whether it is that the four walls weigh upon me, I know not; but my brain invariably seems clearer in the open air than under lock and key.

Therefore, after thoroughly enjoying a very good little meal, and just one cigarette, I place myself in the hands of Félicie; and it is not long before I emerge therefrom, armed at all points, and as fresh as paint. Not that I expect to meet a soul during my peregrinations, for people here do not stir abroad till just before the opening of the tables —but because I do not look my best *en déshabillé*. My Gossip will keep my secret, I know; sometimes, alas, I look *dreadful* in the morning! But, thanks be, I was taught the noble art of *le maquillage* by an Emeritus Professor, and I will defy you to distinguish the result of my *petit quart d'heure* before the looking-glass, from the most authentic health-bloom of the most unsophisticated parson's daughter in all England.

So, looking as fresh as a daisy, and arrayed in a soft slate-coloured frock of cunning "accordion" cut, a neat little slate-coloured *toque*, patent-leather shoes, red silk stockings, and red umbrella, I issue from the portals of the Hôtel de Paris just as it strikes ten, and make for the retired nooks of the Casino grounds which overlook the great and glorious blue shield of the Mediterranean. I think that I should be really fond of the sea if it always looked like the Mediterranean does to-day. I recollect perfectly that in the whole course of my married life with Mr. Despard, there was nothing about him I appreciated so much as his yacht. The first thing I shall make Algy buy (even before a drag, although I delight in horses) will be an 80-ton cutter.

Besides, I am aware that if there is one costume more than any other that suits me *quite* down to the ground, it is a yachting-dress. And then I am a very first-rate sailor (except on the channel steamers),

so that "a life on the ocean wave" is just what I should like, and *will have* for two or three months of the year.

Again, it benefits one so much in society. There is a certain ring about "Mr. and Mrs. Balfour have left town to join their yacht at Cowes," which mere wealth does not impart to the record of one's movements; not to mention that, like charity, it covers a multitude of sins. Who could find fault with a British matron for smoking an occasional cigarette, drinking an occasional S. and B., or letting fall an occasional "big, big, D—," when you have seen her accept a ducking from some big wave without wincing, and perhaps in a little less stormy weather take a turn at the tiller?

But how my pen *is* running away with me to be sure! Here I am at the seat which I have predestined as the scene of my cogitations, and here, apparently, is the order of my cogitations settled for me. Apparently, I am not to be allowed to choose which of my three male friends shall occupy my brain first; for here, on the very seat I had chosen, reclines Lord Udolpho Daysey.

I am not sorry to have the opportunity of speaking to him privately without having had to write to him, or in some way petition for an interview. I think I said, in my last notes, that he had rather kept away. At all events, I have not seen him, except at a distance, for several days.

"Good morning, Lord Udolpho," I say sweetly. "What brings *you* out so early?"

"I might ask you the same question, Lena," he answers moodily, "if I didn't know so thoroughly well."

"I say," I break in; "I wish you wouldn't call me Lena! I haven't seen anybody about, certainly; but there might be some old cat within hearing. It would look suspicious, wouldn't it, considering how awfully ceremonious we always are to each other?"

He takes not the remotest notice of what I am saying, perhaps because his big eyes are so hungrily fixed upon mine.

"Look here, Lena," he says hoarsely; "I know why *you* are up so early, why you have come down to this retired seat."

"How silly you men are," I laugh; "as if you *possibly* could know."

"You came here," he continues, "to meet Algy Balfour. You came here to have a good long spoon with Algy; no doubt to accept Algy's kisses, and return them with interest."

"Really, Lord Udolpho," I say, as soon as I can, "you are forgetting yourself. You have no right to say such things. To tell you the truth, I came down here to be alone—alone with my thoughts. And to tell the *whole* truth, I was going to think chiefly about *you*."

"About *me!*" repeats Dolly in great astonishment. "About me! Nonsense—impossible—you are chaffing me!"

"Indeed, indeed, I am not chaffing you," I say with an earnestness about which there can be no mistake; "I have been thinking about you a very great deal, especially during the last couple of days."

"Since Algy Balfour proposed to you," he growls, "over at Nice, the day before yesterday, you mean."

"How on earth did you get to know that?" I burst out, with feminine curiosity, and forgetting that I am betraying myself.

"There was no need to confess it as you are doing now," he says bitterly, "nor was it necessary that I should be as clever as a detective to find it out. When you came in to breakfast next morning there was a triumphant look about you, and a possessive look about him, that told the tale plain enough. Besides, he told us all about it in the smoking-room at night. Damn him! Oh, yes; I knew you had landed your big fish!"

"How dare you talk like that of me and Algy!" I exclaim in righteous indignation; "I—I—I love Algy very much."

"You love Algy very much," he snaps out; "oh, yes! I dare say, a lot!"

"Now, look here," I retort, "if you are going to be nasty, Dolly,

I will never speak to you again. This is what I feared. I am so terribly frightened when I think how fearfully I am in your power. How *could* you have been so cruel as to lay such a plot against me?"

"How often must I say to you," he cried, indignantly, "how often must I swear to you that it is *somebody else's* plot, not mine? How often must I swear to you that I was ushered into your room by a servant; that I believed you expected to find me there on my return? But there is one thing I need not repeat—that is, my oath of secresy. You know your secret is as safe with me now and throughout my life as if I were in my grave."

"No, it is *not* safe!" I exclaim; "if you are going to get into the habit of talking to me as you did just now, and of alluding to Algy as though he were poaching on your preserves. What would people say if they had heard you just now? Why, that Lord Udolpho Daysey must have some hold upon Mrs. Despard, or the brazen creature would never allow him to address her in such a manner."

"Ah, Lena! Lena!" he cries, in a broken voice; "I am the most unhappy wretch in the world! I thought a flirtation with you would be an amusement, *pour faire passer le temps;* it seemed to me that to make a conquest of you would be no small feather in my cap, and look at the end of it! I love you; I have fallen in love with you without knowing it, without wishing for it; hopelessly, madly; head over heels and altogether. I can't ask you to marry *me;* I have not even enough money to keep myself. And anyhow, I couldn't ask you to give up Algy Balfour with his £30,000 a year."

I am becoming affected in spite of myself. I suppose I must possess a *very* affectionate disposition, for the slightest touch of eloquence in love-making always moves me deeply, and inclines my heart towards the wooer; that is, of course, for the time being—say five minutes.

"Poor fellow!" I say, sympathetically smoothing his curly hair with my hand; "poor fellow!"

"Permit me, then," he says, "that I present M. le Prince Volgareff, the Russian Ambassador to the Court of Westphalia—Mrs. Despard."

He catches hold of both my hands, and begins devouring them with kisses.

"I deserve it! I deserve it!" he murmurs. "Conceited ass that I was, to think that I could make love to you without singeing my wings! And now what have I left? I shall see you now and then. You will always be kind to me, won't you, Lena? And that is all. You will be another man's wife; you would soon forget my very existence, if it were not that I am the depositary of your confidence. Ah, Lena, your secret is safe with me!"

A voice behind me startles me very nearly into fits.

"Madame Despard," it says, "permit me to have the distinguished honour of presenting to you the Prince. Ah, *mon Dieu!* Madame is not alone. Excuse my intrusion."

M. Paul Dromiroff and the Russian *diplomate* are standing in front of me, with their hats off.

"But that matters little," continues the Bear; "Monsieur will excuse us—the presentation, at all events, need not be delayed. Permit that I introduce M. le Prince Volgareff, Russian Ambassador to the King of Westphalia."

* * * * * *

I suppose that my immediate future has been mapped out by Providence in accordance with some special design, for the compassing of which it is absolutely necessary that I should be possessed of a very large amount of self-control; for I have of late been subjected to so many successive shocks that I should be tempted to rebel against the dispensation, were it not for the "pious opinion" I hold that there *must* be some inscrutable and pressing necessity for this constant calling to arms of my powers of dissimulation. Practice, however, makes perfect, they say; and so no doubt in course of time I shall become a thorough Sphinx; my face will have the sad look of a mask; and I shall be as inured to any sudden alarm as any old cavalry charger.

However startled, therefore, I may be at the sudden advent of M. Paul Dromiroff and his friend, just as Lord Udolpho Daysey is engaged upon the somewhat compromising operation of pressing insane kisses upon my hands, I manage to preserve my equanimity.

"So, you see, Lord Udolpho," I cry, "you are wrong after all. My gloves are *not* perfumed with violets. Have you never heard of the new essence of amber?"—Then, turning to Dromiroff, with an unabashed smile—"I shall be charmed, M. Dromiroff."

"Permit me, then," he says, "that I present M. le Prince Volgareff, the Russian Ambassador to the Court of Westphalia—Mrs. Despard."

"The lady about whom is raving the whole of the Riviera," smiles the diplomatist, bowing to the ground. "I have long wished to have the honour of making your acquaintance, Madame."

"The honour is mine, M. le Prince," I say, modestly. "It is not every day that one is so favoured as to meet a *diplomate* of European reputation. But allow me, on my side, to introduce Lord Udolpho Daysey—Prince Volgareff—M. Paul Dromiroff."

The ambassador gives Dolly two fingers. To my surprise, the *Haute Police* merely nods.

"We have already met this morning, Madame," he says, carelessly; "besides, we know each other. *N'est-ce pas, Milord?* we are both honorary members of the *Méditerranée*, you see."

I do not know why I should be particularly moved by this intelligence, as I have only just myself proposed to introduce Dolly to the Bear; but, somehow or other, the fact that he *already* knows Dolly fills me with a strange uneasiness. Bah! I must get over this; I must shake off these fits of nervousness. I seem to be getting uneasy at *everything* now-a-days.

"Just as you came up," I say to the new-comers, pulling myself together, and trying to look as fascinating as I can, "we were engaged in a desperate dispute, Lord Udolpho and I."

I hazard a look at Dromiroff, to see if he is giggling; but he makes no sign, so I pursue my remarks.

"He insisted that my gloves were perfumed with violets," I say, pulling them up an inch or two nearer my shoulders; "but I know better, of course. It is the new scent, essence of amber. By the way, I didn't know that amber *had* any scent; did you? But then, you see, we poor women are so crassly ignorant; aren't we? What do *you* think of the scent, Prince Volgareff?"

And I hold up a tiny scrap of lace for the delectation of his olfactory system. While he is sniffing at it, with an expression of beatitude upon his parchment face, I seize the favourable opportunity of taking stock of him. He is elderly, but not old; of imposing appearance, but not tall; distinguished-looking, but not handsome. Indeed, his prominent, sharp-cut nose and piercing eyes, together with the sparseness of his grayish saffron hair, give him a good deal the semblance of a gentlemanly condor. A long, narrow, iron-gray moustache does not hide his thin determined lips, which, however, can smile very pleasantly and disclose a set of good teeth. He wears no rosette at his buttonhole, which, as he is a foreigner, proves that he must be a very great swell indeed: and he talks excellent English, as, indeed, do most Russians who have any pretension at all to be considered either "good form" or *pschutt*. And that is about the best portrait of him I am able to sketch before he speaks again.

"It is most certainly a delicious perfume, Madame," he says, restoring my "pocket-handkerchief" to me; "and I have heard it said that not only was there a most subtle odour in amber, but that it possessed many other virtues, such as being an infallible talisman against poisons, and herein rivalling even the far-famed emerald of the Emperor Ivan the Terrible; being also a most potent love-philtre and therein excelling all others in the attracting of love towards the wearer. But it is certainly not for that latter reason that Madame wears it. The conquests of

Madame *feront époque* at Monte Carlo. It was only yesterday that the Duc de Barbazure was telling me that he was trying his best to get an introduction."

The "society talk" of the diplomatist is evidently as *vieille cour* as his English. They are both perfectly correct, perfectly flowing, and perfectly old-fashioned.

"What!" I cry, in feigned astonishment; "has the Duke lost *another* wife? There must really be something fatal about that man."

"It is so, Madame," responds the ambassador; "his fifth wife went to swell the ranks of the Beatified only three months ago; and Monseigneur is already looking out for a fitting successor to so much youth and beauty. He saw *you*. Now, I say no more!"

All this time poor Dolly has been puffing and blowing at the other end of the seat. The great and good Dromiroff has been attempting to fabricate conversation with him, and even *for* him; but his efforts have not been attended with the slightest success. Nothing more than a gruff "Yes" or a surly "No" has Dolly vouchsafed in answer; truly, I think I may set my suspicions at rest about their connection, for it does not look much as if Dolly would be able to endure more than five minutes of M. Paul Dromiroff's conversation.

On this occasion, at all events, after he has cleared his throat, shuffled his feet, lit his cigar, let it out and lit it again, and manifested other signs of masculine impatience, he rises, and turns his back upon Dromiroff.

"Mrs. Despard," he says, with that assumed calmness which deceives no one but the speaker; "you will excuse my going now. I am engaged to breakfast with some fellows."

"Well, good-bye, Lord Udolpho," I say coolly, giving him the tips of my fingers. "*Bon appétit!*"

But he does not go yet. He stands gazing at me as might some love-sick schoolboy, and as if he would rather eat *me* than his breakfast.

"I am thinking of leaving Monte Carlo to-night," he continues,

huskily. "When can I—? When will you—? I should like to take my leave of you, you know, Mrs. Despard."

"*Grand Dieu! Un départ!*" I exclaim tragically, throwing up my hands; "and where may Milord be going?"

"Going!" he echoes, with a look of hollow despair; "I'm sure I don't—I mean, I *had* thought of going after the big game in the Terai Jungle, at the foot of the Himalayas, you know. Or perhaps of trying for a commission in the Egyptian army."

"Monsieur will perhaps remain to us after all," suggests Dromiroff, without a smile. "Monsieur has apparently not yet arrived at any fixed decision as to destination or object of journey."

"'Monsieur' never *does* decide," says Dolly hotly, turning suddenly upon the Russian, "until he is at the ticket-office."

"You have reason, Milord," retorts Dromiroff, imperturbably. "In that manner you adorn all your voyages with the additional charm of uncertainty."

The Briton turns back to me, after flashing a black look at his club friend, and muttering something very like an oath.

"So, Mrs. Despard," he resumes, constrainedly, "as our *slight* acquaintance is so soon to be brought to an abrupt conclusion, may I ask you when it will suit your convenience for me to pay my P.P.C. visit this afternoon?"

In reply, I am cruel. I know it. I do it advisedly. I *need* not be cruel. With a word, I could send off the poor boy *aux anges*—I could prevent his departure. With a look, I could keep him from his pretended "breakfast." But I am cruel for the fun of it, and, above all, *because I am a woman.* Women are the cruellest animals in all creation; not excepting tigers, hobbledehoy schoolboys, disciples of the late lamented Nana Sahib, and Hanley clog-wearers. Confession is good for the soul; and that is why I confess the sad fact, seeing that your mouth, my old Gossip, can only be opened by this pretty little gilt key.

Women are shockingly cruel—that is my experience of them, and *I* am a woman. If a man have a rankling sore on him somewhere about the heart, trust a woman to rub salt and cayenne pepper into it. If a woman have fallen into a deep miry ditch, trust a woman to pour more mud upon her, and go fetch a pole to thrust her down yet further.

But to resume, as the parsons say.

"Well, Lord Udolpho," I say coolly, extricating my fingers from his iron clutch, "if you are really so anxious to say good-bye before you go, you can drop in this afternoon about five. You know I always have tea ready then for such of my friends as can tear themselves from the tables."

"I will be there at five," he says, hoarsely, raising his hat.

"Besides," I continue, maliciously, "you will kill two birds with one stone, you see. Algy Balfour is *sure* to be there, and you are *great* friends, aren't you?"

Lord Udolpho Daysey disappears precipitately.

"*Pauvre enfant!*" murmurs Prince Volgareff with a sigh.

"What a tremendous waste of breath about nothing!" I say coldly, fanning myself with my monster red fan, and pretending not to have heard the Prince's remark. "I hate boys like that. A man of the world would have made the appointment in two words. I assure you, Prince Volgareff, I am sincerely pleased at having made your acqaintance. I shall expect you, when you have the leisure, to show me sometimes what conversation really is."

"Ah, Madame!" exclaims the *diplomate*, "it is from you that we learn it. If a man shines in a *salon*, it is because he is drawn out by the ladies. Look at the Comtesse de Corallis—what wit! what *entrain!*"

"The Comtesse de Corallis?" I repeat, much interested. "I have met the Comtesse—not in society, I grieve to say, but here. That lovely creature who plays so recklessly—who is such a pet at Marlborough

House; who gives such splendid balls at her hotel in the Faubourg St. Germain, and her house in Grosvenor Square. The Comtesse de Corallis, *la Reine de Paris et l'Impératrice de Londres*, as they call her. Oh, *do* tell me all about her!"

"I will," says the Prince, quite pleased at having so aroused my interest. "Well, you must know—— What is it?" Dromiroff has whispered something to him, and is pointing to an approaching figure.

"*Oh, mon Dieu, quel contretemps!*" he exclaims. "It is his Imperial Highness the Grand Duke Ivan. I must join him. Madame will permit me to call and finish my tale in her boudoir after breakfast?"

Madame graciously permits, and the diplomatist hurries off to his Grand Duke.

"*I* will tell you 'all about' Madame de Corallis," says Dromiroff. "I think the story will interest *Mrs. Dcspard* more than she thinks!"

CHAPTER XVII.

I Decline an Important Appointment.

I AM evidently in the hands of the police. I am the captive of M. Paul Dromiroff's bow and spear.

Although his words were polite enough—"*I* will tell you all about the Comtesse de Corallis. The story may interest you more than you think"—his manner makes them tantamount to a command. He seems to have said: "Look here! you've got to listen to *me* this morning, and just you budge at your peril!"

There he sits, dressed from head to foot in superfine black cloth—frock-coat, trousers, double-breasted waistcoat, and all; chimney-pot hat, small black tie, three diamond studs, multi-coloured rosette. How *can* a man, even an official, adopt such a fearful costume of his own free will in this lovely paradise of the free-and-easy?

Yes, there he sits, his bristly inch and a half of waxed gray moustache on an end with determination, his podgy black legs stretched out in front of him, one hand exposing the big diamond ring to the best advantage over his stomach, and the other removing and replacing a huge cigar between his lips at stated intervals.

The very picture, I should imagine (though he is the first specimen of the animal I have ever come across), of the Russian bear.

Scratch him, and I will wager a fortune you would not have to scratch long before you found the Tartar.

It is true that all I have to do to avoid him is to rise, and stroll off to my breakfast at the Café de Paris; but, for one thing, half-an-hour is still wanting to the time when I told my *futur* to order that same breakfast; I am wildly curious to hear the full, true, and particular "secret history" of the brilliant Comtesse; and, after all, this strange man *does*, it cannot be denied, exercise an occult influence over me, and possesses a fascination in his small, gimlet eye that controls me as if I were his "subject" and he a mesmerist.

"Well!" I inquire, after a long minute's silence; "and your story, M. Dromiroff? I am all ears, and prepared for anything."

"I was thinking," he says sedately, between two voluminous puffs, "with what incident in the story it would be best for my purpose to begin. You see, it is a *very* curious story."

"I *believe*," I retort, equally sedately—"though, of course, I should not like to press *my* opinion upon you—that it is usual to commence at the beginning."

"There is some sense in that," he rejoins, as though weighing the point; "but, to tell you the truth, I had some thoughts of beginning at the end. Still, in order to conform with usage, perhaps I had better begin at the beginning. So listen, Mrs. Despard! Once upon a time——"

As he begins the time-honoured exordium to all fairy tales, with uplifted forefinger and nodding head, the chief of the dreaded Third Section looks so exactly like an elderly Mandarin which I used to see and covet at the curiosity shop in the King's Road, Brighton, that I cannot help bursting out into an insane fit of laughter. But my intempestive merriment has no effect upon him whatever, beyond making him repeat his phrase in even a more accurately Mandarinesque way than before.

"Once upon a time," he resumes, "there was a young English lady called Br-rown. She was the daughter of a priest of the Anglican Church in a little village in the county of—of—I cannot remember those abominable names—either Varr-vick-shire or perhaps Gloss-sess-terr-shire."

I may here remark that, although M. Dromiroff speaks excellent English, he seizes every opportunity of falling foul of our language, and on such occasions feigns to have the utmost difficulty in pronouncing the most ordinary proper names.

"*Eh bien!*" he continues, "it seems that your Anglican priests are well paid, and are able to move in good society. I am told that a country vicar and his family are invited even to the *châteaux* of the greatest magnates in the neighbourhood. But against this advantage must be set the sad position of the widow and her children if the *père de famille* happen to die before having amassed a competency for them, or, at all events, before having secured matrimonial alliances for his daughters. Accustomed to the best society, they disappear from society altogether; accustomed to live in luxury, they have to work for their living. And that is just what happened in this case."

"In the case of the Comtesse de Corallis?" I inquired, maliciously.

"Not so fast, *belle dame*," says the Mandarin; "not so fast. We shall come to the Comtesse de Corallis in good time. I mean, that is just what happened in the case of Miss Br-rown. She had for twenty years of her life been accustomed to all the amenities of *le hig lif* (as the boulevardiers call it); she was beautiful; on the eve of an advantageous marriage; universally admired; and, in her circle, universally envied; when her father comes to die.

"Poor, proud, beautiful, alone in the world (for she had long been motherless), what was she to do?

"Miss Brown advertises herself as governess in the *Times*.

"And the next day Miss Brown is requested to call upon the Princess Vassilikoff at Claridge's Hotel, London. And a week afterwards she is installed as preceptress to the little Vassilikoffs and *dame de compagnie* to the Princess at a salary of £200 a year. What do you say to that?"

"I say," I answer, "that Miss Brown was a wonderfully lucky

girl; but that I must tell you I am quite longing to get on to that lovely Madame de Corallis."

"All in good time," nods the Mandarin; "all in good time. But you must hear something about the Princess and her husband first. I say, advisedly, the Princess and her husband, because everybody was agreed that she was by far the better half of the two. Not that she henpecked him: far from it. He adored her; and she, I think, idolized him. She was the guiding spirit, that was all. They led a magnificent and an ever-varying life: now spending the height of the winter season at St. Petersburg, to finish it at Paris; now giving hospitality to troops of friends on board their stately steam yacht, only to carry them off for the rest of the autumn to the Prince's Kasan estates, where the most exciting of sport and the most exhilarating of gaieties were always at everybody's disposal. Amid all this whirl of pleasure, Miss Brown was able to keep her position unshaken; she even improved it, for gradually she became indispensable to the Princess, and then soon left the schoolroom entirely for the *salon*. And here, though she was the life of the whole party, and the admiration of all the men, her tact and dignity enabled her to avoid arousing the jealousy of the Princess or the envy of others."

"Really, M. Dromiroff," I say, half rising, "I see nothing whatever of La Corallis in all this. And, as my breakfast must by this time be ready and waiting, perhaps you will excuse me if I put off the conclusion of your story till a more convenient time."

"Mrs. Despard," says the official, "five minutes more or less will not injure your breakfast. Besides, what do I care if they do? It is important that you should hear this out—at all events, as far as the point where Madame de Corallis makes her appearance. And how do I know whether I shall have another opportunity of an unsought confidential interview like this with you before you go? You may be staying on for weeks. You *may*, on the other hand, be meditating

sudden departure—to-morrow, to-day. Who knows? So, if you please, I will take my five minutes *now*. That will be just the time I want."

Is this man Old Nick in person, by any possibility? *Could* he, by any chance, have found out that I *do* meditate flight, and that promptly? He is certainly looking at me very searchingly just now from under his beetle brows.

Pish! Pshaw! Pooh! Bah! How *could* the man know it, unless he happened to be one of the Thought-readers one hears so much of in the London papers now-a-days? No one on earth except myself knows it—not even Algy, yet.

"Proceed, M. Dromiroff," I say, therefore. "*Vous avez la parole.*"

"Things being much as I have feebly tried to describe them to you," he continued glibly, "we were painfully surprised to find a change for the worse in the Vassilikoff *ménage*. We noticed that the host, from being merely a gay young leader of fashion, was developing into a *beau ténébreux;* that more time was spent on the feudal estate, and less in the capital; that hunting parties, given ostensibly to chase the wild boar or the wolf, generally degenerated into merely equestrian promenades, in the course of which they generally happened to meet other hunting parties from distant châteaux; that balls, begun with the greatest brilliancy and troops of dancers, soon subsided into quadrille parties of some sixteen couples, while the rest of the guests held whispered and animated conversation with each other in sombre groups. *Bref*, we found out at last that Vassilikoff was in the habit of receiving unknown and mysterious visitors at his postern in the dead of night."

"But 'we,' '*we*'?" I interpose. "Who is this ubiquitous 'We'?"

"Who should it be," he retorts, with some self-satisfaction, "but *La Troisième Section de la Chancellerie Impériale?*"

"Oh!" I cry, with a faint shudder. "But how did all this come to your ears? His servants were your agents, I suppose?"

"Servants? Bah!" he says, with a puff of contempt; "at that time three of his most intimate friends were in our pay!"

"Horrible! Horrible!" I exclaim, forgetting all about La Corallis for the moment in my righteous indignation.

"*Que voulez-vous?*" he continues, shrugging his shoulders. "But to come to the point at last. All this information was very valuable, but it merely put us on the *qui vive.* It made him a suspect, that was all. We wanted something more definite—some proof positive, such as papers, letters, and so forth. We wanted some subtler, more insinuating agent, such——"

"Such as——?" I repeat, mechanically, as he hesitates.

"Such as *you*, for instance, my charming lady," he resumes. "Now do not become angry, or I shall not be able to finish my little fairy tale. Not having your valuable assistance to invoke, I immediately fixed upon —you don't guess?—upon Miss Br-rown."

"Miss Brown!" I repeat again, parrot-like. "I had forgotten Miss Brown."

"*Mais parfaitement!* Miss Br-rown!" continues M. Dromiroff; "I fixed upon Miss Br-rown at once. I knew her well by report. Her name occurred frequently in the communications of my agents. Everything was to her credit. I almost knew her by sight. I met her frequently at the receptions in the Vassilikoff Palace at St. Petersburg, and even entered into conversation with her once or twice."

"*You* in the Vassilikoff Palace!" I exclaim. "How on earth did you disguise yourself?"

"Disguise!" he repeats, in slight astonishment, "I went as an invited and honoured guest,—the Chief of Secret Police. Did you not know that Nihilists and conspirators generally make a point of inviting high officials to their chief festivities, for the purpose of disarming suspicion? Well, I observed her. I noticed her attitude,—calm, collected, *digne.* I remembered the story (which, by the way, I knew to be true)

of how she had rejected with scorn the magnificent offers of one of our Grand Dukes; and I came to the conclusion that her weak point must be ambition. A very rare thing among women, this special sort of ambition; but it struck me that she was ambitious of Power. The very thing for my purpose. Therefore, I did not say to her, as I have said to so many: 'Betray your friend, your employer, your benefactor, and the next day I hand you your passports and an order on the Treasury for 100,000 roubles;' but I gave her to understand that if she obtained for us the proofs we still were in need of, she should be permanently employed under the Imperial Government in high diplomatic functions; that she should always have command of funds to keep up the high state needful to her position; and that, when due opportunity presented, his Imperial Majesty, in his paternal solicitude for all his faithful servants, would provide a husband for her of suitable rank, and so increase her income as to enable her to figure among the noblest at Court."

"A tempting prospect!" I say with a sneer; "but I should be afraid that when the dirty work was done the Government might feel disinclined to keep its pledges. Besides, what pleasure could she ever derive from all her splendour, knowing that she was nothing more than the despised slave of an Autocratic Power, knowing that she had given up her will, her affections, her whole life into the 'tender keeping of a despot?'"

"Mrs. Despard," answers Dromiroff, sententiously, "we are all betrayed, more or less, by our servants; but take my word for it, those of us are least betrayed who pay the best. You may be very sure that the Government which I have the honour to serve is not going to make the mistake of underpaying its agents, or of acquiring the reputation of not fulfilling its engagements."

"There is something in that," I concede. "But I return to my point. After she had received her reward, how *could* she enjoy it?"

There must be some sort of fascination connected with the "behind-

the-scenes" of politics, for I find myself entering into the subject with as much earnestness as if I were personally interested therein.

"How *could* she enjoy it?" reiterates the Mandarin with a twinkle in his eyes. "How does the Comtesse de Corallis enjoy her eminent position in society?"

My brain must be in a sad state of confusion. Again I had forgotten the lovely Comtesse.

"Ah, you were going to tell me 'all about' Madame de Corallis," I answer, "and you have wasted all your time over this stupid English governess. Pray, what have the feelings of the Comtesse to do with those of Miss Brown?"

"More than you think, Madame," he says quietly.

"The Comtesse de Corallis connected with Miss Brown!" I cry.

"Indissolubly," he nods.

"Good heavens!" I exclaim; "you don't mean——?"

"I mean, Mrs. Despard," he says impressively, "that the Comtesse de Corallis *is* Miss Brown; or, to use more correct language, that Miss Brown has become the Comtesse de Corallis, 'Queen of Paris and Empress of London,' thanks to her great talents and to our gracious Emperor's boundless generosity."

I don't think my breath was ever so thoroughly taken away in my life. All my preconceived notions are upset. What! this leader of fashion; this friend of Sovereigns and Royal Princes, and intimate of Ambassadors and Nobles; this dazzling beauty and supposed millionnaire,—a Russian spy! A common spy, this Queen of Hearts! Impossible.

And yet it is equally impossible to disbelieve Dromiroff. That is to say, *almost* equally. For, at this moment, I *do* disbelieve him. And I turn round upon him fiercely, and say so plainly.

"Ah, ha! M. Paul Dromiroff," I cry; "notwithstanding all your pretended admiration of my acuteness, you think you are able to make me believe that? I will stake my life it is an invention from beginning

to end—an invention on the spur of the moment to suit some secret purpose of your own."

"From beginning to end," asseverates the Mandarin, "it is true."

"Recollect," I persist, "that the Ambassador is coming to see me after breakfast. I shall ask *him*."

"Ask him, by all means," he says, coolly; "only don't seem to know too much about it. Ask him what the maiden name of Madame de Corallis *was*."

There is a short silence, during which I puff and blow in suppressed wrath, and he produces another elephantine cigar from his case and ignites it carefully. Then he resumes:—

"Whether you believe it or not, I have begun my story, and I had better finish it. I will do Miss Brown the credit of saying that she met my advances with much the same objections as you have urged. She did not express the least horror at the idea of becoming what you called the other day, with so much contempt, 'a spy;' indeed, she considered the question with more *sang froid* than I had expected. But she doubted whether the result would satisfy her. Whereupon I sketched in such glowing colours the delicacy, the dangers, the triumphs, of three or four missions upon which I could employ her if successful in this, that her determination gave way. She came to terms, as you will—I mean, of course, as you would in her place."

"She was a horrid woman!" I cry. "How *dare* you compare *me* to her? And so she betrayed the Princess?"

"She was five years an inmate of the Vassilikoff family," answered the Russian; "and she sent the kindest of masters to the Siberian mines for life. *Voilà!*"

"She was a demon!" I cry again.

"She was only an ambitious woman, that is all," corrects Dromiroff. "Well, after that important and distinguished service we could scarcely do less than afford her another chance of showing her calibre. Important

negotiations were going on at Bucharest, that hotbed of intrigue. We sent her there under the chaperonage of the Countess Rostopchine, as Miss Hudson, the Texas Cattle Queen, on her travels. She professed to fall in love with Bucharest (and several silly people there), stayed the whole winter, and came back triumphant. Our next venture was a still more touchy one. There was an imbroglio at Constantinople, brought about chiefly by the underhand action of the Harem. I was fortunate enough to get Miss Brown (in her own name, with a strong five years' character from Princess Vassilikoff) the appointment of English governess to the children of the Sultana Validé, the chief mover in all plots against our influence; and, with the valuable information with which Miss Brown was thus able to supply us, our Ambassador was more than a match for the Porte, and indeed outwitted them completely."

"Perhaps she was a born diplomatist, this spy of yours," I say contemptuously. Strange, that with such a righteous contempt for the woman I do not rise and go. My breakfast is waiting now, and no mistake.

"Upon the happy conclusion of this great adventure," continues the mandarin, utterly unheeding my interruption, "we saw that we had at last got hold of a treasure. We could not do less than fulfil the remainder of our promises."

"And get your spy well married?"—very acrimoniously.

"And get our spy, if so please you, Madame, well married," repeats Dromiroff, obediently. "For our purpose, it was necessary to fish out some *bonâ fide* relations for her, and to find a husband of irreproachable birth. She quickly brought over a great-aunt from England (a terrible woman, called Viscountess Badstock) by writing to say that her late employer had left her a fortune. I soon had news from Paris that Raoul, Comte de Corallis, of the oldest blood in France, had lost his last sou at baccarat, and was starting to join the Chasseurs d'Afrique. A little diplomacy. And a grand wedding at the English church, followed by a still grander one at the Madeleine."

"But it rather surprises *me*," I say, trying to pick holes in his story, "that no one in the crowd should have recognized her as the rich American of Bucharest?"

"Did you never hear of hair dyes?" he asks, looking at my hair with insulting keenness. "Miss Brown's hair was golden; Miss Hudson's jet black; la Comtesse de Corallis' *was*, on that auspicious occasion, golden, but it has since, I believe, turned auburn in accordance with the fashion."

"And this, on your *honour*," I inquire, doubtfully, "is the *real* Corallis of the Faubourg and Grosvenor Square?"

"*Foi de gentilhomme!*" he exclaims, solemnly. "His great family connections gained them admission to all the Courts in Europe: the funds with which we constantly supplied them set all suspicion at rest. To sum up in a word: Miss Brown 'played the spy' for us in a country house; La Corallis 'plays the spy' for us at St. James's as well as the Elysée, at Schönbrunn as well as in the halls of the Quirinal. And now you know 'all about Mme. de Corallis.'"

"I might say," I answer, tartly, "that it has been a horrid story to listen to, that you have been a horrid time telling it, and that my breakfast is quite spoilt; but I won't. I will ask you a question instead. Why did you say that this story of yours would have more interest for me than I should think?"

"You have just given me the opportunity I wanted," he says, almost eagerly, and sitting up straight for the first time. "For this reason, Mrs. Despard: I wanted to show you to what a lofty and dazzling eminence people may rise who serve us, and serve us faithfully."

"Your eminence does not tempt me," I say, coldly. "It is most probably a very giddy one, and might give one a nasty fall. Besides, I don't care about wading through miles of mud, only to fall off a monument at the end."

"Madame, madame," he interposes, "you are too hasty; you jump at conclusions. When I asked you the other day if you would join us as secret agent, you screamed out at once to all the four winds, 'I will not become a Russian spy.' Again I put the question to you, but in a different way. I put it to you that, if we are so fabulously generous to our regular agents, is it not likely that there would always be some handsome little fortunes to be made by those who render us services, but who prefer to pick and choose for themselves as to what those services shall be? What do we ask of you? Do we ask you to betray your friends? Do we ask of you to listen at doors? Do we ask of you to injure anybody? No! a thousand times, no!"

"What *do* you ask, then?" I inquire with irritating calmness.

"Wheedle some funny little State secret out of some funny old Ambassador," he laughs, shrugging his shoulders. "Enter into good relations with foreign noblemen who have noble dreams for the universal good of all nations; induce some insular and angular British statesman to recognize the mission of Holy Russia; *Que sais-je?* A host of pretty little services you would render us!"

I allow a moment to elapse before I reply.

"But where, then, is La Corallis," I ask, suddenly, "if you are so sorely in need of me?"

"The Comtesse?" he says, with a slight, a *very* slight, change of colour. "Oh, bah! the Comtesse? She is on her travels. She is on the grand tour. I believe she is visiting the Holy Cities of Palestine."

"In that case, M. Dromiroff," I say, rising, "you had better wait until Madame de Corallis comes home; and, no doubt, she will do all those little things for you right away!"

He rises also, and makes me a low bow.

"It is very evident, Madame," he says, with a curious smile, "that I have failed to impress you with the advantages you will derive by following in the footsteps of this distinguished lady."

For an answer I turn on my heel and sweep away with the dignity of an injured and insulted queen.

But he toddles on at my side all the same, and dribbles out sparkling small talk with that ease which is only the result of long practice.

We have reached the Casino, and are just about to mount the steps of the hotel, when a tall Englishman meets us, is evidently about to speak, as evidently thinks better of it, and then turns and walks away precipitately down the Place.

It is Jack Fortinbras.

I feel that I have received a shock (how many more, I wonder?), but I do not show it. I take my leave of Dromiroff with a slight nod at the hotel steps, and disappear up into my room.

Jack Fortinbras here? Then it is no longer any use my leaving Monte Carlo, for he would assuredly follow me.

But why did he turn away so quickly just now?

He is certainly not afraid of *me!*

Is he, by any chance, *afraid of Dromiroff!*

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Leech at Work.

"JACK FORTINBRAS in Monte Carlo!" I think, as I stand before my glass "correcting" my face, and dashing a little fresh scent on my pocket-handkerchief. "Then it is not the slightest use *my* troubling to run away. I shall stop as long as I choose, and defy him."

For it has just struck me that I *can* defy him.

I know that he has thoroughly fleeced Lord Udolpho Daysey, for he has told me so himself; so there is *one* enemy in the place I could pit against him.

And I do not think that Algy Balfour would grant him an audience, much less listen to a word from him against me. I think it is much more likely he would tell Jack that if he was not out of Monaco in a couple of hours, he would place himself in communication with the police. So there is another difficulty for him to contend with.

And I cannot help fancying that Dromiroff may have met him before under some shady circumstances on the Continent. In which case, I am very sure that a word from me would make the place much too hot to hold him; for, although Dromiroff may hold no authority here, I think the Monagasque officials are as much at his orders as if they were Russians.

Yes, I could defy Jack Fortinbras well enough!

But, on second thoughts, it is a risky game. I know Jack *au fond.* I have seen him once or twice when he has been well-nigh desperate; and he certainly was a dangerous animal to deal with then. And if now, arriving at Monte Carlo with almost empty pockets, I were to refuse him what he calls his "share of the plunder," he would become *quite* desperate. A state of mind which would probably result in his forcing himself upon my *fiancé*, and saying, "You call me a swindler and a villain. Well, I am. I acknowledge it. But, if I am, so is your future wife. She is as unscrupulous a swindler and as deep-dyed a villain as I. Here are my proofs. Now marry her if you like!"

And I shudder as I remember how Algy said he would drop me like a hot coal if he thought I had any but the most passing acquaintance with Captain Fortinbras. True, I should not be reduced again to doubtful expedients or genteel pauperism. Thanks to that lucky evening at the roulette-board, I have enough to live upon in a moderate way for life. I shall always be able to buy bonnets and shawls, always be able to provide myself with bread and cheese; nay, even butter. I shall be able to keep up my little Mayfair house, or to pay for a seaside lodging, at my pleasure. Even the joys of foreign travel will not be denied me.

But what a shabby existence in comparison with my present prospect of becoming mistress of Balfour Castle! What a humdrum circle in comparison with the brilliant company which I purpose shall presently surround me!

Ah, no. At any risk, at any sacrifice, Jack's mouth must be shut, and kept shut. I will accede to all his demands; I will give him whatever he asks, if only he will leave me in peace!

But stay! would that be wise? It will certainly be no small sum that he will ask for. Five and twenty pounds may be of some use to a man staying in a country house within a ten-shilling fare of London; but when an extravagant ex-cavalry officer has travelled all the way to Monaco "to raise the wind," it is certainly not a pony or a couple of ponies that

will satisfy him. No doubt he will consider he is letting me off very easily if he contents himself with asking for £500.

Under these circumstances, it strikes me that the best course I can adopt will be to entertain his proposal without comment, keep him quiet (as long as I think fit to stay here) with occasional sops, and leave it to Time and the Hour to decide as to the *dénouement.* The longer I can keep him in the dark about Algy the better, for the less money of my own I disburse the better I like it. I am not a mean woman, but I *do* hate "parting" to Jack. When I think of what a lot of pretty little things it would buy for Lena Despard, and of the brazen *cocottes* into whose hands a good deal of it will assuredly float, it makes me feel quite melancholy.

Just as I have arrived at this point of my ruminations, and have succeeded in shading the bistre under each eye to the true natural tint, there is a loud, impatient knocking at the door. As I have finished my toilette at last, I go myself to the door, and admit Mr. Algernon Balfour, who looks as if he has got out of his bed the wrong side this morning; in fact, in anything but a good temper. I hold up my face to be kissed.

"Mornin', Lena," he says gruffly, and taking no notice of my inviting action. "Do you happen to know what time it is?"

"Oh, yes!" I answer sweetly; "just ten minutes past twelve."

"And you told me to order breakfast at a quarter-past eleven for half-past," he retorts reproachfully. "Of course it's spoilt now."

"Well, Algy," I say, gaily, "let's go down and order another."

"Of course!" he grunts; "that's easy enough; I could have told you that. But a man don't like waiting for his breakfast all the same."

By this time I am undulating down the stairs, with my beloved at my heels like a big collie.

"By the way," he blurts out, "do you *always* get up as late as this? Because if you do that at Balfour Castle my mother will look upon you as a heathen and a child of the Evil One."

"Get up as late as this?" I repeat, with innocent blue eyes wide open as tea-cups. "I've been up for hours. Hours! I've been walking in the Casino Gardens. And I've had quite a long talk with that nice old bear, Paul Dromiroff, and his friend, Prince Volgareff, the Russian Ambassador to the Court of His Majesty the King of Westphalia!"

This I mouth out with the greatest pomposity, and an asseverating nod of the head at the end, as much as to say—"There, young Balfour! what do you think of that?"

I do not at the moment discover what "young Balfour" thinks of it, for I resume my regal progress towards the restaurant; but as soon as I take my seat at our usual table, I perceive that a storm-cloud has gathered over "young Balfour's" brow.

"Well, what shall we have?" I inquire amiably. "Good gracious, Algy! what's the matter? For heaven's sake don't look at me like that!"

"Order what you like," he growls; "I don't care."

Willing to propitiate my irate lord, I order the same breakfast that Monsieur ordered. But the waiter informs me that the breakfast Monsieur ordered was a special order, and would take at least three quarters of an hour, if not an hour, to prepare.

Algy listens to this with grim pleasure; but I pretend that I am not put out in the least, and order a breakfast of some sort *tant bien que mal.*

"Look here, Lena," he says, as soon as the waiter has disappeared; "of course, there is not the slightest harm in your going out for long walks before breakfast—not the slightest. But, at the same time, I do think you might have asked me to come with you."

I am about to speak, but he waves to me not to interrupt.

"That, however, has nothing to do with it. It is not the point I was about to touch upon. But I was about to say that I consider it hardly seemly for you—engaged to be married to me, as you are—to be amusing yourself with a couple of dissipated, debauched, diplomatic

He waves a greeting with one hand, and removes his cigar from between his lips; but he does not make the slightest pretence of leaving the sofa.

old Russians, when in the fondness of my heart, I imagine you to be sleeping the sleep of the just."

Algy Balfour is jealous, seriously jealous! If it were not that he *is* so serious about it, I could laugh my heart out. As it is, I compose my face, and answer him with all becoming gravity.

"My dearest Algy," I say, "you don't *really* mean to tell me that you are angry with poor little me about that? Why, to begin with, I have known old Paul Dromiroff for years—long before I knew you."

This is a fiction which the Bear told me I should find useful, and of which I *have* made use, though at the time I indignantly scouted the possibility of my ever condescending thereto.

"And then, after the Prince had expressed the desire of being introduced to me, I could not do less than be commonly polite to him, could I?" Besides, look at his position! You see, Algy, you may be rich, but mere riches do not gather about you men who have made their mark in history."

That last phrase is rather good for a "little 'un," I fancy!

"No, you're quite right," retorts Algy, grimly: "mere riches *do not*, doubtless; but a pretty wife *does*. And I'm not so particularly anxious to be honoured by the society of any elderly *roués* at all."

"Why, Algy," I cry, trying to be sprightly, "I declare I believe you're just a teeny weeny bit *jealous* of me!"

"Jealous? Pooh!" he says, with supreme contempt; "I'm not likely to be jealous of such people as those. Indeed, I'm almost sorry I spoke at all. It really does not matter so very much after all. And it will only make you say, like women always do: 'If he goes on like this before marriage, what may I not expect afterwards?' I dare say you look upon me as a perfect tyrant already."

"Oh, Algy!" I exclaim, reproachfully, "how *can* you say so? I look upon all you have said as a proof of your love for me. You would not be so anxious about me if you did not love me so truly. If you

only knew how sweet it is to be reproved by some one who really cares for you!"

And here I heave a deep sigh, and look unutterable things.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, Lena?" he says at last, now almost himself again.

"Oh, I don't know," I answer, carelessly, "anything you like."

"Well, the fact is," he says, in some confusion, "I had half promised Sir Harry Jones to run over to Nice with him, and have a look at the trotting match between Picayune's horse and the American Plunger's. But, of course, if you would like to go anywhere, I needn't tell you I'd give it up like a shot."

"On the contrary," I say quickly, "I hope you'll go. It just chimes in with my arrangements. I have a mountain of letters that *must* be answered some time or other, and it has been weighing on my mind dreadfully. I'll answer them all this afternoon while you're away, and we can go to the theatre in the evening together—that is, if you're back in time for dinner."

So the *déjeuner* that began so stormily ends quite pleasantly; and I even do my Algy the honour of walking down to the station with him to see him off.

The train has puffed out of sight. He is off. What a stroke of luck! As an interview with Jack is a necessity, what a boon to possess two or three hours of safety wherein to have it! So I hurry back to my rooms to write him a note which will bring him round at once.

This trouble, however, is saved me. As soon as I appear at the top of the stairs, I perceive Félicie, who is hovering about in a distracted state up and down the corridor.

"Ah, Madame!" she cries, "you are alone, *Dieu merci!* I was afraid you would arrive with Monsieur Balfour, and you have forbidden that they should see each other in your house. So I wait in the corridor.

I should have said that your room was being cleaned. I should have prayed you to descend to the *salon!*"

From this disjointed ramble I gather that Jack has invaded the sanctity of my apartment. Rude, but natural!

"Why did you allow Captain Fortinbras to walk in, Félicie?" I ask, severely.

"Ah, Madame, I forbid him!" she cries excitedly; "I stand in the middle of the door! But he push me aside, *V'lan*—like that! And he say, 'Go to the devil, fool!' and I find myself sitting on the sofa with the force of the blow!"

"That will do, Félicie," I say, turning aside, that she may not see the grin on my face; "you may go now."

Then I walk up to my own door, open it wide, and sail in like an infuriated turkey-cock.

John Fortinbras, Esq., late Captain in Her Majesty's 5th (Queen's Own Musketeers) Dragoons, is reclining on the sofa by the open window. He is smoking a very large and very fragrant Havannah, and a tumbler of my special dry Pommery is on a chair at his side.

"I've come to inquire, Jack," I say, with considerable asperity, "whether you have gone *quite* mad this time or not; and, if not, how you account for your extraordinary behaviour?"

As I conclude my energetic exordium a ray of sun invades the dusk of my *salon*, and brings Jack into full view as he lies stretched there at ease on my favourite sofa.

Speak of Jack Fortinbras as ill as you like; call him by what shameful names you like; besmirch him, belabour him as much as you like,—you cannot deny that he is, in appearance, every inch a gentleman.

He may have committed many an ungentlemanly act in the course of his stormy life. Much of his past life would not pass muster under the close scrutiny of a court of honour. A very *mauvais quart d'heure*

for him would be a cross-examination by some eminent counsel, well posted as to Jack's antecedents.

But, in appearance, at least, he is a gentleman, *s'il en fut jamais.* From the crown of his closely-cropped swart curls to the tip of his pointed patent-leather boots; from the careless sweep of his silky dark moustache to the perfectly-fitting ease of his light tweed suit; from the simplicity of the costly chain that hardly shows through his coat to the delicacy of the strong fingers that hold his cigar—he looks a gentleman.

At first sight he seems a most desirable person to know, especially to young men about town and girls in their first season. Very especially, too, to girls in their first season. He is their ideal, their Lara, their Guy Livingstone. And when their mammas find out (as they needs must do sooner or later) all about the Black Sheep, and he gets the sack, very inconsolable are their lamentations, very bitter are their recriminations in his defence, and very solemn are their vows of eternal fidelity to the *Scacciato.* But, of course, they soon "get over" Jack, as if he had been a sharp attack of measles.

Even to me (who know him thoroughly) he seems desirable-*looking* enough. It is very aggravating to think how few handsome people are really to be relied upon, and how painfully true is that old proverb—"Handsome is as handsome does."

However, the sight of a handsome face always affords me a transient sort of satisfaction, like the inspection of a beautiful picture, or sculpture, or wild beast; like a glimpse on the dusty road of some bit of glittering blue sea with the white sails dotting its heaving bosom like big sea-gulls: or like the sudden gleaming apparition of the long, white, jagged line of the Bernese Oberland as you top some stiff Alpine ascent.

My entrance disturbs our friend but slightly. He waves a greeting with one hand, and removes his cigar from between his lips; but he does not make the slightest pretence of leaving the sofa.

"Extraordinary behaviour?" repeats Jack. "What have I to say

in explanation of my extraordinary behaviour? Ha! ha! That *is* a good 'un. I don't see anything extraordinary about it at all, except your forbidding me entrance. By the way, I hope I didn't give Félicie too much of a shaking. She's rather nice, and I shouldn't like to hurt her. Well, she oughtn't to get in the way, that's all."

Like the man in the play, I stand "pausing for a reply," with one hand on my hip and the other impatiently tapping the table with my fan—though I don't suppose the man in the play carried a fan, so he must have done it with something else—umbrella of the period, perhaps.

"As for my coming up here," continues Jack; "what more natural? Considering what friends we two have always been, and that we were actually partners up to a year ago, I don't quite understand your astonishment."

"What!" I cry, dramatically; "do you mean to tell me that you don't know as well as I do that at this moment you are risking my reputation; that at this moment (who knows?) you may already have compromised me beyond retrieval—somebody may have witnessed the pretty scene: Captain Fortinbras bursting into my rooms after a smart struggle with my maid Félicie? Do you mean to say that you do not know that to be seen in your company means ruin to me, and that your presence in my apartment would contaminate me for ever in the eyes of Algy Balfour?"

Jack Fortinbras rises and stretches himself, with a broad grin, which reveals white teeth that look decidedly wolfish just now. "Now," he says, "my dear Lena, I can drop equivocation, and tell you honestly and plainly why I came here."

"Well, why?" I inquire, snappishly.

"For two several and distinct reasons," he retorts, sententiously; "one was the hope of hearing you spout that speech you spouted just now."

"The hope?" I repeat, thoroughly bewildered. "What speech do you mean?"

"Why," he replies, "that grand jaw that you sputtered forth just now about reputation and compromise, and ruin and contamination. It wasn't very flattering to me, but it was just what I was hoping to hear. I should have been most awfully disappointed if you had received me with open arms, and asked me to have a brandy-and-soda. That would have meant that you had no money, that you wanted *me*. You are never commonly polite to me unless you are hard up. Whereas, when you avoid me, when you talk of my compromising you, I know full well that you have some plant on, that you have found some goose with the golden eggs whose prejudices have to be respected. So you've made it all right with Algy Balfour, have you?"

He looks at me searchingly; but if he thinks that I am going to be pumped at *my* time of life, he is vastly mistaken. I walk across the room, and instal myself in a comfortable arm-chair.

"I need not ask you what the *second* reason was," I remark, entirely ignoring his question, "that brought you here. You want money, of course. How much is it this time?"

Jack sits down again, and pulls out his note-case, which he inspects as if he did not know to a penny what it contains. Then he produces a large pile of silver from his right-hand trousers-pocket, and a smaller pile from the left.

"Let me see," he says, pensively; "three fivers, six and a half Naps in gold, and twenty-three francs in silver. That's the bank at present. You can tot it up better than I can."

"Just exactly 528 francs," I say, magisterially; "or, if you prefer it according to the English computation, nearly half-a-crown more than £21. Surely, you can't be in any immediate want of money."

"Well," says Captain Fortinbras, as if considering the point, "with strict economy—the strictest economy, mind—I *think* I could manage to live here three whole days on it. I *think* so."

"Don't be such an idiot, Jack," I say, laughing, in spite of myself,

at the serious, frugally-minded look he had assumed. "Out with it! How much do you want?"

"Well, Lena," he answers, quite affectionately, "I *want* ever so much more, of course, but I *must* have £500 at least."

"Five hundred pounds!" I repeat, aghast.

"You must be mad, Jack; you might as well ask me for £5000 at once. Look here; be reasonable for once. Will £50 be of any good to you to go on with, and I'll give you some more when I've had time to write to London for it?"

"Well, hang it all, Lena," says Jack, after a disappointed pause, "you'll have to make it three ponies, you know. Fifty pounds last no time in this infernal place. Come along—fork out!"

So I disappear into my boudoir, and shortly return with £75, which I trust will stay Jack's insatiate maw for a while at least.

Then I make him open another bottle of Pommery, and, this time, drink thereof myself, and, furthermore, indulge in the luxury of a cigarette.

"I can't say much for you," I observe, between two puffs, "as a correspondent, Jack! I left you at Denston Park under the most favourable circumstances; sole master of the field; thrown into constant companionship with an heiress and a great beauty. Of course I expected to be kept *au courant* of the progress of your suit, if not to receive a diary of your love-making. Instead of that you send me one short, badly-expressed letter, from which I gather that somehow you have succeeded in failing to please Miss Vyse, but which does not explain *how*. Now, tell me all about it. Instead of coming here to drain *me* for money, you ought to be a married man, and rolling in wealth."

"Ah, well, you see," he answers, "I never *was* a good hand at describing things. And this, by the way, is rather a sore subject. I must say I felt like pulling it off. I don't think I ever felt so cock sure about anything in my life. She seemed to have taken such a thorough fancy to me."

"When did you find that out first?" I inquire carelessly.

"Oh, a day or two after you left," he replies. "You know, about two or three days after you left, Sir Thomas Gage went off suddenly on some mysterious business, and came back in a couple of days looking awfully seedy, and, as Miss Vyse and I thought, rather guilty."

Little does the noble Captain suspect where Sir Thomas Gage was bound for when he left Denston; little does he know that if it were not for *me* Sir Thomas Gage would be hanging at my apron-strings to this very day.

"Well, while Sir Thomas was away I was, somehow or another, thrown a good deal with Miss Vyse, who was most kind to me. At last I thought matters were ripe, so I proposed, and I think I did it very well."

"And what was her answer?" I inquire.

"That she liked me very much, but she would marry no one. She had once loved and had been disappointed, and she should never really care for any one again. I tried to shake her determination, but it was useless. Confound her!"

Jack gets up in his rage, and then, referring to his watch, suddenly finds out it is time to trot.

So he "trots."

But as he passes through the open door, I hear two voices in astonished rejoinder:

"Hullo!" says Jack's voice.

"Hullo!" says another.

And in another moment Lord Udolpho Daysey stalks into the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

My Marriage Appears Imminent.

Hôtel de Paris, Monte Carlo.

LOOKING over the last few pages of my confidences to you, my "dere diry," I find that I have branched out at unconscionable length with regard to the events of these latter days. Page after page of conversation reported verbatim,—why at this rate, my gossip, you will swell to such an inordinate size that I shall not be able to carry you about with me! You will be a diary in fifteen volumes before I know where I am.

But the result, the consequence, of each of these conversations may prove of such importance in my future that I think it quite as well to note them down as they take place, and even to rack my memory to recall the exact words which were used, the gestures which accompanied them; indeed, every slightest detail which may enable me to account for circumstances which are otherwise unaccountable. One forgets so easily what has been said in the heat or the lassitude of chatter. Your friend looks coldly upon you; you forget that you wounded his pride by something you let slip and immediately apologized for this morning. Young Spoonbill never sent you that opera-box for Patti's last night after all; but then, you should remember that most walls have ears, and that you certainly *did* tell Lady Jericho the other evening that the only reason you tolerated that zany Spoonbill at your parties was that he saved you a clear £100 a year in stalls and boxes.

It is just as well to jot down even the most trivial detail that recurs to your remembrance. There is no knowing what warning it may convey, what pitfall it may not reveal, what light it may not shed, when you read it over, say, three months hence.

This, therefore, must be my excuse for the elaboration which I have bestowed upon my late contributions to your information; an elaboration which certainly savours a good deal more of the Three Volume Novel than the Diary, and shows (I say it without fear of contradiction) that I really have a turn for literature.

I am sure I should be at no loss for a plot. Some of my own adventures would form very dramatic plots indeed. Some of my friends' adventures would outvie even *them* in intensity. And as for the descriptions, language, grammar, local colouring, and so forth, I am quite sure that little Tom Doomster, the little barrister I fascinated at Vichy last year, would put that all right for me. And *he* ought to know something about the proper way of writing novels, as he is literary editor to the *Weekly Poopoo*, and reader to Messrs. Shortman and Sharp, the eminent publishers.

However, to return to the story of this eventful day. As soon as I hear the voice of Lord Udolpho Daysey in amicable salutation with Captain Jack, I ring my silver bell furiously, and the faithful Félicie makes an immediate appearance—rather too immediate, indeed, inasmuch as it shows that she must have been just behind the door during the latter part, at least, of my interview with Jack. But, as she is already pretty deep in all my secrets, that does not much matter.

"Félicie!" I cry, sharply, "if Lord Udolpho Daysey calls, I am lying down with one of my nervous headaches, and cannot see any one."

"Oh yes, you can, Mrs. Despard!" cries a wrathful voice, as the door bursts open, with a crash of its complaisant and ineffective French lock, which I had fondly relied upon as a full protection against any sudden intrusion.

"Oh yes, you can, Mrs. Despard!" cries Dolly, as he enters the door, with a very pale face and a strangely unsteady gait, "you can see me; and your nervous headache can vanish into thin air for the present, like your other deceptions. It is true I had not intended to inflict my presence again upon you *against your will.* I was about to leave you this note—my note of farewell. I was going away without a word, when I learned something just outside this door that gives me the right to come in and have a little talk to you before I take my departure."

It is as he says. In his hand he holds an envelope addressed to me, and he is evidently dressed for a journey.

According to my usual practice under such circumstances, I do not attempt to answer him yet. I simply confine myself to considering how I shall deal with the situation; and waving Félicie out of the room.

"Leave us, Félicie," I say majestically, "but stay within call."

On his side, he does not say anything for a moment, but tears open his letter, and looks over two closely written sheets of his own handwriting.

"Eight pages!" he says at last—"eight pages of sentimental rubbish written by a man who ought to know better; by a man who calls himself a man of the world!"

And then he tears it up viciously, as if it were my flesh and he were tearing that. And then, becoming aware that my gaze is eagerly fixed on the paper (for I am hoping that he is about to hurl the fragments from him), he carefully replaces them in the envelope, and that in his pocket.

"Oh no, you don't, Mrs. Despard!" he laughs, with a look of abnormal cunning. "You'd like to piece the letter together again, and show it to people, and laugh yourself into fits over it, wouldn't you? But you won't—you *won't!*" and he flings himself down involuntarily into an arm-chair.

"You have been drinking, sir," I say severely. "What do you mean by coming into my presence *drunk?*"

"Drunk?" he repeats, with a hiccough. "Your presence? I am not the first person who has been drunk in your presence, by a long chalk."

"How dare you say such a thing?" I cry, starting forward in my chair."

"Dare?" he repeats, as before; "I dare a good deal more than that. I *dare* say you have welcomed men—ah, dozens and scores of men!—to your presence who have been *made* drunk by you! Yes, Mrs. Despard, by you and your confederates; but principally and most often by you."

"And do you imagine for a moment," I retort, with a fine smile, "that because you are so bold as to 'dare say' all that—as to invent all those falsehoods—that the fact gives you any right to stagger into my apartment in this state, or indeed, to enter my apartment at all—in *any* state?"

That fine smile of mine is one of my peculiarities. When it appears on my countenance it portends nothing good to the person I am smiling at, or happens for the moment to occupy my thoughts.

It is then that I feel most like the—

"Destructive, damnable, deceitful woman"

of the old play. It is then that I feel—*peculiar!*

"I dare say not," he answers calmly. "But as you happen to be the confederate of a man who has fleeced me to the tune of £3000 odd, I think I have some right even to *force* my way in with the object of asking you how you dared deny the fact in Paris when I spotted you at the Eden Theatre."

"You are labouring under a mistake," I say, quite gently. "You never suggested such an abomination when you spoke to me in Paris. You simply asked me if you had not seen me in certain compromising

resorts with Captain Fortinbras. I answered in the indignant negative, which was the strict truth."

"It was false!" shouts Dolly, now beside himself with agitation and the fumes of drink. "Why, have I not just seen, with my own eyes, Jack Fortinbras leaving your rooms with the air of a conquering hero?"

"Nothing more natural," I say with the most utter calmness; "although I am naturally distressed to have to contradict so courteous a gentleman as Lord Udolpho Daysey, Captain Fortinbras, who has only just arrived in Monte Carlo, was introduced to me for the first time—last night."

Dolly sinks back aghast into his chair.

"Last night!" he echoes. "Only last night!" He can't get over it for some time. At last he returns to the attack: "A desirable introduction, on my soul. You have allowed the most thorough-paced rascal and swindler in the whole of Europe to be presented to you. I don't think your beloved Algy Balfour will *quite* approve of the acquaintance for you. Of course I am at liberty to say *where* I met Captain Fortinbras this afternoon if Balfour should ask me?"

"Most certainly," I respond; "you may say anything you like about it to Algy. Because, you see, the person who introduced Captain Fortinbras to me in the roulette-room last night was no less a person than—*Algy Balfour himself!*"

I have told many lies in the course of a long and arduous life, but never a "banger" such as this have I perpetrated either before or since. It is a bold stroke; but its effect seems to be entirely successful. Dolly is utterly flabbergasted; he lies back comatose in his chair breathing hard, and saying never a word. I have won the day.

"I needn't add," I drawl, fanning myself lazily, "that if you took it into your silly head to suggest to Algy that he had introduced an improper person to me, he might take into his obstinate Scotch head to tell you to 'Gang to the deevil, and mind your ain business!'"

This evidently sinks deep into Dolly's mind, and takes root there, whence it will in all probability sprout forth into a very pretty quarrel.

"And now," I say, rising, and stifling a yawn, "don't you think it's about time for you to get up and go? I am expecting the Russian Ambassador to put in an appearance every minute; and you are looking most disgustingly disreputable. Come, be a man; get up, and go home. Lie down and get a couple of hours' sleep. You'll be all right then."

He looks at me vacantly, with the tears in his eyes.

"I'll go, Lena," he stutters. "I'll go if you'll give me something to drink."

I go direct to the cellaret, and fill a small tumbler with brandy and water.

"Here," I say, "drink this, and pull yourself together a bit, there's a good fellow."

The spirit seems to revive him. He does pull himself together, and looks almost sober. Then he walks across the room nearly as far as the door. Then he stops and turns back, holding out his hand. Two big tears (not *altogether* maudlin, I am vain enough to fancy) well up in his blue eyes and slide down his cheeks to the floor.

"Mrs. Despard!" he falters—"Lena! Will you—can you—forgive me?"

"Good heavens!" I cry, excitedly. "The Ambassador's voice! Go, quick now, for goodness' sake!" And I ruthlessly hustle him out of the room.

Poor fellow! I am half inclined to pity him. If he *was* tipsy, he had been drinking to drown his sorrow at leaving me; if he *did* come to my rooms, he did not intend to intrude further than to leave a last farewell (in eight pages) with Félicie. Unhappy youth! Fatal gift of beauty that I possess! Ah, me! Oh, dear! Alas!

Hardly have I absorbed the glass of green Chartreuse, which is

necessary to restore my somewhat shaken nerves; hardly has Félicie set the Rose Fountain going and cleared away the glasses, when a discreet knock announces the arrival of a more diplomatic visitor than my last.

"Ah, madame," says the old Prince, bending over my hand and whisking his gray moustache lightly over it, "I am later than I had hoped. But, *que voulez-vous?* To get away from an Imperial Highness is almost an impossibility. Now, however, I can recount to you the secret history of La Corallis."

"No, Prince," I reply, "I will ask you to serve me better. Offer me your arm as far as the shooting lawn, as all Monte Carlo will be there to see the Gold Cup shot for. And you can tell me some of your own diplomatic experiences on the way."

And very soon I am toddling by the tall Ambassador's side on my way to—a more important interview than I am at all anticipating.

* * * * * *

As we wend our way towards the shooting ground, the frequent bang of the guns warns us that the competition has already begun. The meeting is under the auspices of the International Gun and Polo Club, at whose pleasant grounds, near Brighton, I have spent many a delightful afternoon! Under the spreading trees of Preston many is the blue rock I have seen laugh to scorn the odds on the gun with a whirring rush and lightning-like flash; many is the hotly contested game at Polo that I have watched, where blows rained fast in the *mêlée*, and the shins of riders as well as of ponies kept record of the fact.

It is not long before we arrive at the trysting place. Indeed, Monte Carlo is so small that it is not long before you arrive anywhere. From the Hôtel de Paris you are in the railway station in a couple of jiffs; you have hardly left your bedroom before you are standing among the throng at the Trente-et-Quarante table; and as the theatre is almost under the same roof as the shrine of the Goddess of Fortune, if you

prefer to patronize the play, you cannot be said to be running far afield in search of your pleasures.

Here, in the presence of a large audience of the fair sex, who profess to be "so sorry for the poor pigeons," but know exactly when to back the gun, the members of the Club and other distinguished strangers disport themselves in every variety of male finery, and display their prowess with every variety of weapon.

Surely, this is the most peculiar as well as the most picturesque shooting ground in the world. Backed by the cliff, the lawn gives the merry sportsman just room for a fair shot, and then dips down, a sheer precipice, into the sea; so that when a pigeon is winged, it is *en pleine Méditerranée* that he is caught by the host of hangers-on, who swarm under the cliffs in boats just like their British prototypes do outside the enclosure at Hurlingham or the Gun Club on dry land.

It is very pretty, however, to see a blue rock who has baffled both barrels, and a small volley from the flotilla below, speed his strong way out to sea and liberty. Doubtless he soon changes his course, and makes for land; but as he goes he looks as if nothing but the orange groves of fair Algiers would stop him, and it is a pretty sight.

And now I am on the subject of pigeons, I will take the opportunity of wondering why their lives must needs be sacrificed to the fancy which possesses most men for measuring their skill against each other with the fowling-piece.

There is one answer—only one, and that a bad one—namely, that the only possible substitute for live birds would be a mechanical contrivance, and that (O word of fear!) would not be "Sport."

Sport, indeed! Surely, surely, there is no sport in clapping birds half-dazed with imprisonment into a trap, and letting them out to be potted at twenty-five yards' rise by sportsmen who care not one jot for the glory their skill will gain them, but who care a very great deal for the money it will put into their pockets.

Sport, forsooth! Why, there is more *sport* in a drag-hunt! So I really do *not* see why the noble marksmen should not content themselves with the nimble glass ball or the volatile but artificial highflyer, and leave the poor pigeons to come to their inevitable end in less wholesale fashion.

But all this does not bring me any nearer the conclusion of my narrative of this eventful day's *péripéties*, so I had better return to my faithful old Ambassador, who is talking glibly on, heedless of my inattention.

Of the gay and giddy company, some I know, and they know me (not many, thanks be!); others I do not know, and they do not know me. Many I know very well, and they—well, they know me not at all.

Either this last class are composed of High Mightinesses, to whom nobody is anybody who does not figure in their immediate circle, and, therefore, are naturally ignorant of my existence; or of people in society, who pass the principal part of their lives in trying to keep other people out of it, and, therefore, are especially hard on any one who to their knowledge has once been *in* it, as I have.

It is this second division of the last class that I, of course, have specially *en grippe*, whom I specially dread, and whom, of course, I most ostentatiously defy, set at naught, and, generally speaking, sniff at.

Fortunately, Algy knows none of this dangerous crew, or—which comes to much the same—refuses the honour of their acquaintance. They are too stiff and formal for him, too starched and cut-and-dried; he likes something more free and easy—more natural, and give and take, and *laisser aller*, you know, like his little Lena!

Rather a change, after his *grande passion* for the stately and straitlaced Miss Vyse, is it not?

But as I think of the consequences if one of the ghoulish band,

who feed upon the corpses of socially dead *mondaines*, their whilom compeers, should inform Algy Balfour of my matrimonial episodes, a cold shudder runs down my back which is positively painful, and which makes me wonder whether it is like that that great criminals feel when they are arrested.

I have never actually *deceived* Algy. I have never told him in so many words that I was a widow, that my late husband was dead. But I have allowed *him* to say as much in my presence scores of times. I have even, by imploring looks and secret signals, induced to silence men who knew the truth of the story as well as I did, and before whom Algy would brag that he was about to disprove the infallibility of the saying that marriage with a widow is seldom or never auspicious.

It would really be a very serious thing for me indeed if by any chance Algy were to chum up with somebody who knew too much.

But *zut! flûte!* A truce to such moanings and groanings and ill-omened intonings. Let us attune our harp to a merrier lay. This is not the Lamentations of Jeremiah, but the *Journal d'une mondaine;* and I am *not* fated to reach this point of my fortunes only to be hurled down again to the bottom of the rugged path just as my trembling little hand grasps the prize.

My sweet old Prince has just found me a luxurious lounging chair, and has produced from the depths of his inner consciousness a dainty satin bag, which I discover, to my quite infantile delight (for I am too babyishly fond of *bonbons*, you know) to be full of *marrons glacés*, my very favourite form of *confiserie.*

I complete his conquest by one of my patent "upward" looks (*you* know,—a very slow, long look, with a final quick flutter of the lids, and a *soupçon* of a sigh to underline it), and then turn my attention to the proceedings.

Who is that, just ready to fire? The old gentleman with aquiline

nose and close-cropped white hair and peaked beard, with a black velvet costume that makes him look quite Vandykeish, and a deadliness of aim that makes me feel inclined to back him in ponies against the field? Who is that aristocratic-featured personage? He might be one of the Bourbon Princes, or some Spanish Grandee; nothing less, of a surety?

Who is he? Why, Bombinol, of course! Monsieur Bombinol, the retired chocolate manufacturer. He lives very comfortably indeed upon his nice little savings of some £50,000 a year, and annoys his fellow-sportsmen not a little by adding to it with wearisome iteration the proceeds of every second item on the card.

Who is that tall, red-haired man out there, with a red moustache like a tooth-brush in a state of combustion, and a redder face, like a corpulent lobster just emerged from the boiler; with trousers so tight that he must get his legs melted into them every morning before a quick fire, and a vocabulary so plentifully garnished with recondite slang of recent invention as completely to distance, and, as it were, cast into the shade the phraseology most lately sanctioned "for use in churches and places where they sing" by the *Pink 'Un?*

Who is that very objectionable personage? He might be a prosperous Leicestershire horse-coper, or some sawney yokel squandering his father's evilly-gained and avariciously-hoarded thousands; very certainly, nothing more.

Who is he? Why, His Grace the Duke of Fitz-Battleaxe, who, having conscientiously got through two princely fortunes—his own and his wife's—has just sold his priceless collection of ancient armour and church vestments to the Emperor of Timbuctoo, and is now living very comfortably on the proceeds.

Here there stands a handsome young English Royal Highness, most gentlemanly of all European Royal Highnesses, amusing himself immensely with every phase of the bright, varied scene about him, and affording

intense and absolutely indescribable gratification to the pretty young daughter of the English chaplain, by pouring forth in her ready ear an easy and unaffected flow of small talk, having just been introduced to her, at his own request. It is so perfectly natural to him to *be* natural. To her it seems a species of divine condescension never to be forgotten, or to be hid under a bushel.

Here—oh, here, is one of those people whom I know, and who knows me. Thanks be, I know more to *her* discredit than she does to mine, and so I do not fear her!

That is faded old Mrs. Hughes, the wife of Jack Hughes who writes the money article in the *Evening Smasher*. She calls herself "Baby" Hughes, and dresses like sweet seventeen, but I'll swear she'll never see two and forty again. She would give her eyes to be introduced to H.R.H., but there is an objection against that. I wonder what the objection can be. Perhaps that young author who is always leaning on her chair could tell you! Oh, no—I forgot; it isn't an author this season. It is Prince Woronzoff, who calls her his "Bébé" to her face, and roars at her behind her back.

Jack Hughes, her husband, is also a competitor for the *objet d'art*, and it is his turn to fire. Just as the trap snaps open he catches sight of Woronzoff bending much too close to the Sultana of his heart. He fires; misses, of course—Jack generally misses—and turns a sort of mottled purple in his red face. His stubbly white beard bristles fiercely like the quills of the fretful porcupine. He is frightfully jealous of "Baby," I must tell you. He makes for her now. She sees him coming, and rises, trembling visibly. What will he do to her? Will he lock her up with him in their room at the hotel, and then make the midnight hideous by howling for his razors? Or will he——?

"There she is!" says a well-known voice. I look up, and see Algy arm in arm with Picayune, and in the company of Sir Harry Vesey and several other men. Picayune explains that the trotting match was over

sooner than they expected. I go up to Algy quickly, and take his arm.

"Come, Algy," I say soothingly, "take me back to the hotel."

He obeys, and we reach the Casino gates. There he stops.

"Lena, I can't live without you always at my elbow. Let us leave this to-morrow, and be married in Paris the day after. I mean it, by God!"

And he disappears into the hotel. His manner is very strange, and he is evidently labouring under suppressed excitement. *Will* he be of the same mind in twenty-four hours? I think, in any case, I had better tell Félicie to pack.

CHAPTER XX.

Exit Jack.

Hôtel de Paris, Monte Carlo.

WHILE Félicie is packing I review the situation. Dolly will, I am certain, be as good as his word. With him I need not trouble myself. My faithful old ambassador may go back to Westphalia, or to St. Petersburg, or to Siberia, for the matter of that, so far as I am concerned. The one troublesome card fate at present holds in its hand against me is Jack, and that card will be effectually trumped if Algy really remains in his present mind.

If we only start for Paris to-morrow, I shall be Mrs. Balfour before Jack can follow us. And then, if he shows his teeth, why, *sapristi*, I must show mine; and I have a very handsome and strong set. I may have to pay him his five thousand pounds, of course. But he will only jump at taking two on account. That I can manage out of my run on lucky 13. And, when he has once taken it, what can he possibly do further? What was that extraordinary song I once heard some man humming at Ascot:—

> "Says Poll, though I'm sorry to part,
> Yet, quarrel we must, my dear Sue;
> For your character's utterly gone,
> And I've not got sufficient for two."

As Mrs. Balfour, I cannot afford the attempt to rehabilitate Captain Fortinbras. He is *just a little* too well known. Besides Algy would not allow it. And you see, my faithful journal, I shall *really and truly*

owe a duty to Algy. What a delightful change! And it will be too risky a game for Captain Fortinbras to declare war against me with actual black-mail already in his pocket. Poor Jack! You *are* good-looking, Jack, and you're very amusing. But you haven't altogether been fair with me; and it is better for both of us—for me, at all events—that our roads should separate.

It will not do for me to be *en évidence* to-night. Of course, I am so overwhelmed with sudden happiness that I must stick in my own rooms, and brood over it all. My heart, as they say in English novels, is too full for words. Algy has actually asked me to "name the day." What is it that that vulgar woman—Mrs. Cluppins, I think—says in *Pickwick?* "She knows she fainted clean off herself when Mr. Cluppins asked her to name the day, and expects that every one as has the feelings of a lady would do the same."

Not having the feelings of a lady, I will allow my intense emotion to obtain relief in happy and complete repose. So I tell Félicie to order dinner for half-past seven; something light and nice. And until then I will just reckon up how I stand. Before very long I shall have to clear the decks, as they used to say on my second's yacht.

Curzon Street, I trust, will soon be got rid of. Then the balance of my London bills is not so very much. I wish I had time to get back and offer them something small in full before my marriage. The rogues! they would clutch at it. And it would be so charmingly pleasant to save a few hundreds or so. "Butter out of a dog's throat," as that odious Sir Rowland Coverside once said; only I don't think he said "dog," for I recollect he had taken the trouble to see old Elaine for me about one of her outrageous accounts. Ah, well! In any case, my "little pile" is safe in London.

Thanks to those grandest of benefactors, the Controllers of the Casino, and thanks also to my most estimable Paul, I am safe against anything. Yes—literally against anything. Marvellous, isn't it?

And so I sink into a sort of dreamy repose. I really almost wish I were a little younger—provided, of course, I knew all I know now. I feel almost as if I could interest myself in gathering flowers and listening to birds, and gazing at the clouds, and watching the speckled trout leap in the mill-tail. (What is a mill-tail, and why are trout speckled, and why on earth do they leap?)

I really think I'm falling asleep. Am I dreaming?

If I am, I am rudely disturbed by a commotion at the outer door, and, as Félicie makes her appearance, Fortinbras pushes by her. He has a big cigar in his mouth. I am sure he has been drinking, and his face has an uglier look on it than I ever yet saw there. He thrusts his hands into his pockets, throws himself down in a chair, stretches out his legs, crosses his feet at the ankles, and glares at me, not viciously, but downright furiously. It is now or never, and I had better be the first to fire. So I pull myself together.

"Are you utterly mad?" I ask, "to behave in this manner, or only drunk? Or are you both?"

I have sprung to my feet, and I can feel there is danger in my eyes.

"Look here, Lena," he says, steadying his voice, "don't try any of your airs on with me. I know you too well. And I won't have them. And what's more, let's have none of your lies. I've learnt something within the last few hours; and I know all about you, my lady. All!"

Now, I wonder exactly how much he does know. I must find out.

"You are drunk," I say, "which is a strange thing for you, who ought to keep your head cool. I suppose you have been losing at the tables, and you have come here to try to screw some more money out of me. You took nearly all I had only the other day. You see the door. Go."

"You're lying to me," he returns, without moving; "but there's

"I have advised him to leave here at once, and to avoid the terrible temptation of Monte Carlo."

nothing strange in that for you, who live by it. I am not drunk, but I have been losing, and you have not. I have just heard of you."

Thank Heaven! So that is all he knows.

I draw a little breath, and feel I can manage things.

"You have broken the bank," he continues. "You have made £20,000 if a penny. You have it here, and yet you grudge me a few wretched hundreds, and order me out of your room as if I were a cur."

Here he gets up out of his chair, walks to the mantelpiece, leans his elbow on it, and speaks very slowly, emphasizing every word as judges do, I am told, when they sentence criminals. I really believe he thinks all my money ought to be his, and that I have defrauded him of it.

"You promised me five thou. when you marry Balfour. I don't care a single blow whether you marry him or not, or whom you marry or when. But that five thousand pounds I intend to have now and at once. If not I go to Balfour, and tell him all that went on at Denston Park. Now don't argue with me. I will have nothing but 'yes' or 'no.' Give me your answer."

"The money is in London," I reply. "That I can prove."

He meditates for a minute.

"Now, if you were not such a liar," he muses, "I would take your cheque as I have done before. Show me those proofs."

I produce my banker's receipt for my winnings. He looks at it, and considers. Then he continues:—

"None of your cheques for me. I will have this out of you in absolute money. You must write to your banker's to-night to remit the amount to you here. I will give you four days—exactly ninety-six hours from now. Meantime, you must give me fifty before I leave this room. I shall have my eye on you, and should you attempt to leave this place, I go straight to Balfour. No more of your tricks for me."

I make no answer, but I give him the fifty pounds, and he leaves. Now comes the great question, what am I to do?

* * * * * *

Now, here is probably the most perplexing situation in which I have yet found myself placed. If it were not for my Monte Carlo winnings—happily safe at my banker's in London, thank Heaven—I should hardly know which way to turn. If I start to-morrow with Algy, as at present arranged, Jack will be as good as his word. He will come down to the station, or meet us on our way to it, in a state of brandy, and, even if everything does not come out, there will be enough to make things very much worse than unpleasant. If, on the other hand, I see Algy to-night, and persuade him to stop here a few days longer, he may in an hour or two of caprice think altogether better of our immediate marriage, and then all my work for many months past will be seriously jeopardized. It is too dreadful! It is, indeed.

And the worst is that I cannot see my way out of it. The only idea that at present occurs to me is to be terribly ill to-morrow; to send for Algy to come here, and to detain him as long as I can. There will be just a chance of Jack's coming and making another row. But for that I must take the best precaution I can. His fifty pounds will probably last him for a day. However, I can only do my best.

While I am thus meditating, Félicie noiselessly enters and hands me a card. Gracious Heavens! It is my dearest and best of friends, Paul Dromiroff.

It does not take me a moment to decide. "Show him in at once," I say.

The door opens as noiselessly as before, and Paul himself enters, accompanied by no one less than Captain Fortinbras. What on earth does this mean?

I bow to them to take seats, but Jack remains standing. The Russian, accepting the offer, composes himself in his own ursine fashion, and smiles pleasantly.

"Mrs. Despard," he says, "I have the pleasure to be able to bring you some good news. Dallying away my time just now at the rooms I came across Captain Fortinbras, to whom I had once the honour of being introduced. He has paid me the compliment of confiding to me a small matter of some little delicacy, and of asking me my advice. My small experience was only too readily at his disposal. He, with that frankness and absence of all hesitation which is so characteristic of an English gentleman, has decided to act upon the suggestions which I had to offer him. On this point, Captain Fortinbras will, I am sure, corroborate me."

Jack says nothing, but looks doggedly at the floor. I never before saw him so sullen or so utterly beaten.

M. Dromiroff imperturbably folds his plump, round hands over the lower buttons of his capacious black frock-coat, and placidly proceeds.

"Captain Fortinbras," he continues, "has been losing lately at the tables; not much, but still more than a younger son can afford to lose. I feel towards him as if he were a son of my own. I have always had a liking for young Englishmen of family, good education, and unblemished honour. Captain Fortinbras reciprocates my sentiments. I have advised him to leave here at once, and to avoid the terrible temptation of Monte Carlo."

I can see at once what all this means. What bewilders me, to use feminine language, is how on earth it all comes to mean it all. I look at Dromiroff, and I look at Jack. Dromiroff looks at me sweetly, with the air of a guardian angel of exceptional experience. Jack still looks at the floor, and bites the ends of his moustache. I never saw him do that before.

"I know," continues the Russian, "that Mrs. Despard entertains a sisterly regard for the Captain, and I am sure it will be a relief to her to know that he has promised me to leave for London to-night. He has a certain small sum still left, and should he want any more I will see that he is supplied. My solicitor in London is expecting some

important papers, which I have only to-day been able to verify at the Consulate. His clerk will take them back, and will render Captain Fortinbras any little service or attention he may require during the journey. I myself shall have the pleasure of assisting at his departure, and it will always be a great satisfaction to me to remember that I have done a little to prevent some of that unhappiness of which we see only too much in this wicked place."

And M. Dromiroff twirls his thumbs each round the other as if he were really on the best terms with himself for his own high standard of benevolence and morality.

Evidently the less I say the better. And Dromiroff has taken the greatest care that there should be nothing left for me to say. So, after a few seconds of silence, I rise to my feet with my most pleasant and most sisterly smile.

"Captain Fortinbras," I remark, "ought to be doubly grateful to you, M. Dromiroff, and no doubt he is so, or will be. Captain Fortinbras, you are fortunate in having gained the confidence of a gentleman whose knowledge of the world will, I am sure, prove of the greatest value to you. Pray, dear Captain Fortinbras, cultivate the acquaintance of M. Dromiroff, and endeavour to show yourself worthy of it. You will know where to find me," I add, sweetly; "I shall not leave here for some days. Write to me, or better still, telegraph as soon as you reach London. Good-bye, dear Captain Fortinbras."

And I hold out my hand in the very sweetest of manners.

Jack thrusts both his hands deeply in his pockets, turns on his heel, and stalks through the door. My delightful old Bear makes me a low bow that would deserve a smile from an Empress, and follows with that silent footfall which I have noticed myself at the Zoo on Sundays as one of the bear's characteristics. The relief is so intense that the most of which I am capable is to summon Félicie for eau de Cologne with which to rub my temples.

Clearly I need do nothing now until I have heard again from my darling Bear. I could not possibly be in better hands, and I must wait for some hours at any rate before I dare to take a step on my own account. So, when I have a little recovered, the dinner, which has been by this time considerably delayed, makes its appearance. There is nothing more comfortable, I think, than to leisurely enjoy your dinner after you have staved off, for awhile, at all events, some more than usual annoying perplexity.

A cigarette and a suspicion of cognac does me no harm after all the excitement of the evening. Everything is arranged for now, unless Balfour should change his mind: and for that my only course is to wait. To hunt him up or to write to him at this moment would be worse than foolish. Matters must take their course.

And so the charming evening hours slip away until Félicie brings me yet another card, which I gather from her that excellent Dromiroff has just left with his own hands and with a most polite inquiry as to my welfare. Beneath his own name are pencilled the three simple words, "*Il est parti.* P. D."

After this I cannot too soon get to bed, or, for the matter of that, be up too early to-morrow. Félicie has entirely finished the packing, and perhaps one of the most annoying days of my life may be considered fairly over.

CHAPTER XXI.

En Route.

AFTER a really sound sleep I wake early, and feel extremely refreshed. Félicie, obedient to her orders, brings me my morning chocolate, with, this time, a little English dry toast. What a comfort a good servant is! If you had to wait upon yourself, half your time, or more than half, would be taken up in seeing to the most trivial little matters, which would terribly interfere with your plans for the day.

I remember once in London meeting a stupid German, a Professor of some sort. His name was Grumpsen, or Dumpsen, or Schlegels-whumpsen, or something equally terrible. He talked to me about the theory of the universe, and the origin of evil. He said that if we could only get rid of time and space, we should be perfectly happy. He spoke of them as if he meant them to be spelt each with a capital letter, and I asked him what he meant; and he explained that it takes you such a lot of trouble to save Time; and such a lot of time to get over Space, that life is too short for our little humanities.

I think he was quite right. If, for instance, I could just hurry on time by an hour or two, and bring Algy here at once; or if he and I could get by train to Paris in five minutes; or if I could just pop over to England, while I clap my hands, and see exactly what Miss Vyse is doing—for I need not say that I do not believe a word of what Jack

told me about her,—it would be like owning the magical carpet in the *Arabian Nights.* Yes, old Stiltlechunchsen was quite right: space is a terrible nuisance when you have to pay for travelling; and time is a terrible nuisance when it takes liberties with your hair, and your teeth, and your complexion; which brings me back to what I was saying, that a good servant is invaluable, and saves you far more of your own precious time than any wages you may pay her can compensate for.

So I give Félicie a letter for M. Paul Dromiroff, couched in the following brief terms:—

"A thousand thanks. I leave for Paris this morning. You shall hear from me. There are things which one does not forget. My address is Hôtel Continental. Write if you wish."

While Félicie is seeing that my note is safely despatched, one of the *femmes de chambre* enters, and brings me a letter from Algy. I open it, and read it with very little anxiety, as I see that it is a short one. If it had been long I should have been doubtful. Its brevity means that he has not changed his mind.

"DEAREST LENA,—I presume you are ready to start. I shall be at your rooms at a quarter to twelve; this will give you ample time. I was not quite myself last night, or I should have come round, but I remember everything that passed, and every word that was said.

"Yours ever,

"A. BALFOUR."

Everything is packed; all the boxes are ready. Félicie will return directly. There is nothing to do but to ask for my bill, and to settle it. This task I have just completed when Algy arrives.

He is dressed as an English gentleman ought to be. There is no appearance about him that even suggests the excitement of the night before. He shakes hands with me cordially; he observes that it will

be a pleasant day for the journey; he asks if I have given orders as to my luggage. Hearing that the orders have been given, and that Félicie will carry them out, he offers me his arm. And so we go down the staircase together, and make our way leisurely towards the station.

Before we have left the door thirty paces I see my dearest friend, M. Dromiroff, who makes me a most polite and very grotesque bow. He places his right hand over his heart, while with his left he moves his hat and flourishes it wildly, as if he were waving it at a racehorse, or a pigeon, or a balloon. As we open the door and enter the station, Algy throws down a franc and snatches three or four of the day's papers.

I am not usually superstitious: in fact, I have rather less superstition than religion; but I confess that I do not like to see that the day is Friday, and that its number in the days of the month the thirteenth.

While I am, so to say, settling my mind over this little piece of augury, we approach the carriage, and I notice, again to my consternation, that the number on the door of the comfortable little *coupé* is 1,300.

I hear the familiar "En voiture! Messieurs et dames." I ascend and settle myself. Félicie appears at the door, and hands me in my few paraphernalia. The horn blows, the whistle gives a brief shriek. We are off. And as I turn my head for a final look at the place where I have gone through so many strange chances, I again see my dear M. Dromiroff on the station, raising his hat, with an expression of countenance which says as plainly as if in words, "*Au revoir*, Madame Despard, *au revoir*. We shall shortly meet again."

For a few minutes neither of us speak. Then Algy opens the conversation.

"The worst of going off in such a hurry is that we are not sure of getting *wagon-lits* or *coupé-lits*."

"What does it matter, dear Algy," I reply, being determined to keep him in a good humour. "I don't mind roughing it a bit. I am so happy that I have no time to think of any trivial inconvenience."

Algy looks radiant. A few kind words go a long way with him. And they don't cost me much.

"Never mind, my sweet," he says; "when we get to Nice, I will see what is to be done. Anyhow, I will manage to make you comfortable."

At Nice we ascertain that there are no *coupé-lits* that are not already taken, but that we can have two *wagon-lits* at Marseilles. Our journey thither is more or less uneventful. At Cannes, Algy is recognized by some Scotch friends on the platform who are seeing some people off, and who come up to the carriage to talk to him. The men of the party look rather knowing, and the women somewhat suspicious, especially as Algy does not introduce me. However, we are soon off again.

"I didn't quite know what to do just now," stammers out poor Algy. "I thought that if I introduced you to those Macdonalds they would be certain to recognize you again when you met them in Scotland. They live close to us, you know. And they are very straitlaced people, and might think matters looked rather strange. As it is, I think I managed very cleverly, for I got well in front of you, and I very much doubt whether they would know you again."

"You managed splendidly, dear," I answer. "I had no idea you were such a diplomatist."

Algy blushes with pleasure at my ridiculous compliment. He is certainly a very easy fish to play. And a little flattery goes—oh, such a very long way with most men!

Soon after this Algy composes himself to sleep, and never stirs until we are nearing Marseilles, and I think it advisable to wake him. I meantime have been amusing myself with yesterday's Paris papers, a *Morning Post* two days old, and a novel of Daudet's. At Marseilles we get some dinner and change into the *wagon-lits*. As, on coming to Monte Carlo, I had two English strangers with me, so on returning to Paris I find precisely the same state of things. Our travelling companions

are two Englishmen, who are leaving Monte Carlo for their native land; and, in a very few minutes after the train leaves the station, I discover that they are barrister and solicitor. Their conversation I find more or less entertaining, for they are both clever men in their way. And after Algy's effete remarks, alternated with snores, with which I have been favoured during the former part of the journey, I am not sorry for any change. I have always taken a strange interest in legal matters, and, indeed, if I had been a man, I think that I should have gone to the Bar myself; and I fancy that I should have got on in my profession. I am fluent of speech, and certainly plausible, and I really believe that I am almost unscrupulous enough for a lawyer.

* * * * * *

Hôtel Continental, Paris.

I have just arrived here, and while I have a moment to spare, I hasten to inscribe the events of the last few hours in my excellent diary.

"Look here, Lena," whispers Algy, almost immediately after the train has steamed out of Marseilles; "where are we going to stay in Paris?"

"I don't know where *you* propose to go, dearest. I have telegraphed for rooms at the Continental."

"All right. I'll stay there, too," he says.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I reply, becoming suddenly alive to the necessity of respecting *les convenances*. "It may only compromise me. Go to the Grand, or some other hotel. We can be together all day."

"Perhaps you are right," says Algy. "At any rate, I will do as you wish."

After a few minutes' silence Algy recommences:—

"How long will it be, I wonder, before we can be married? I expect that there are a lot of forms to be first gone through. I have

got a great friend at the Embassy. After we have had breakfast I must go and find out all about it."

"Who is your friend, dear?"

"Raymond Guise. He is one of my oldest chums, and will put me up to all the ropes."

Raymond Guise! Good Heavens! He was one of my last husband's most intimate friends. They were old schoolfellows, and have always kept up their friendship. It must be the same man. Raymond Guise is not a common name, and I recollect perfectly that he was in the diplomatic service. I only met him twice, but I should know him again in a moment, and he would be certain to recognize me.

It is quite clear that Algy must not see him. But how am I to prevent it? This I must decide during our journey to Paris. So, for the present, I make no reply, but merely brood over my new difficulty. When once I am married, difficulties may go to the "Father of lies," whence they probably originated; but, until then, I am bound to use the utmost care and discretion, and never throw a chance away.

Meantime, our two fellow-passengers, the barrister and the solicitor, who returned to the carriage at the moment that the train was leaving, and who have hitherto been absorbed in arranging their baggage, and generally making themselves comfortable, commence a fragmentary discussion.

I am, as I say, and I always have been, greatly interested in any legal matters. There is always certain to be some sort of a secret when two lawyers are talking together. So I compose myself. I may as well describe these two men. They have had their influence on my life. The barrister, whose name is Legard, is a man evidently some forty-five years of age; but he looks very much younger. He is thin, lithe, and active. His hands and feet are remarkably small. He has a plentiful crop of curly hair, which is pronouncedly red, and does not show the least symptom of age. His teeth are as white and as provokingly

regular as if they had been built for a rat-trap. His eyes are a mild blue, with a most impertinent stare in them. I never yet came across a man so absolutely and intensely aggravating.

There is something in him that incites you to quarrel. He seems, as it were, to be biting his thumb at you. "I bite not my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb."

The solicitor, as I gather from some inscription on a despatch-box, hails from Bedford Row. I gather also that his name is Meyer Salmon, which, being interpreted, I take to mean Moses Solomon. Mr. Salmon is painfully dressed. It is excruciating to see an ignorant man of fifty trying to look like a gentleman. A gentleman is never ignorant. I do the best I can to listen, but I cannot quite understand what they are talking about. Lawyers are like all other men: the moment they take to a business they invent a language of their own, and so invest their calling with a sort of freemasonry, to which a dialect is purposely devised to hide their secrets. Lawyers have this trick very badly. So have medical men. So have diplomatists. So have racing men. Yachtsmen are bad enough. We women can retaliate a little in our own way. I wonder if they could understand the vocabulary which furnishes the inventory of my dressing-bag. I wonder if Mr. Legard could appraise my modest little travelling wardrobe under Félicie's charge. He is past the time when men fall in love. I hate needless mischief. But it would be rather fun to entangle him, if only between here and Paris. So I begin to listen more intently than ever, with a view of taking a part in the conversation. Algy, I need hardly say, is soon snoring. Merciful Heavens! what a terrible prospect in perpetuity!

As I am listening, I catch some words from which I gather that Mr. Legard is a barrister who, in some capacity or other, is entitled to give advice to Her Majesty's Government, and has been employed upon a confidential mission.

I listen even more intently. They are talking about the law of

extradition. I also catch the name of Dromiroff. Hereupon I go to sleep and listen more keenly than ever.

"There is proof enough for me," says Mr. Legard, twisting his thin, clear-cut lips. "There is proof enough for anybody."

Mr. Salmon apologetically defers.

"Besides," continues Legard (talking to himself, as if the solicitor were an animal of an inferior class in the creation, who had the privilege of listening, but must not join in the conversation without especial permission), "we can trust the old Russian. His information is always exact."

"I never knew it wrong, Mr. Legard," says the solicitor.

"If," says Mr. Legard, accentuating his words, so that they fall like drops of vitriol, "the whole body of you solicitors had an eighth among you of the brains of old Dromiroff, things would be very different from what they are."

At this point I begin to emulate Algy, and to snore. Not an unladylike snore, but a delicate little murmur, just conveying the impression that I am very tired.

"Anyhow," answered the solicitor, "the case is clear enough against the Captain. He must have been selling this information for years."

"Longer," says Mr. Legard, as if he were putting a stupid boy right in an addition sum.

How wonderfully we can sleep on these long railway journeys; I never slept so soundly before.

"He must have got the information, or the power of getting it, through his bill-discounting connection," observes Mr. Salmon.

"That," says Mr. Legard, with an absolutely perceptible muscular movement in his nose, "is a matter of which, Mr. Meyer Salmon, you are perhaps better able to judge than myself."

"I beg your pardon, sir," says the solicitor.

Rattle! rattle! shake! rattle! shake! shake! rattle! whistle! rattle! rattle! clatter! shake! clatter! On goes the train.

"He must have been a bad egg throughout," continues Mr. Salmon, apologetically.

"Of course," says Legard; "as long as he sold them news they paid him. When he sold them lies they put you on his track."

"Anyhow," says the solicitor, in the most deferential manner, "I think we know all the parties implicated."

"That is your business," again retorts Mr. Legard. "From what Dromiroff says, Fortinbras will do best to make tracks for Ecuador, or some such place. As for the poor wretches whom he has got into trouble, they must take the consequences. And let me tell you, Mr. Salmon, that I am very tired."

Rattle! click! bang! click! rattle! On goes the train.

Now here is a very curious link in my life. Although I am a woman, I can understand things. Jack is hopelessly ruined. He has been doing something or other—Heaven knows what—which has brought him in the black books of the Russian police. And the Russian police have sold him to the English police. And the English police have made inquiries. I remember now how Jack shied when he saw my dear Dromiroff. And Mr. Legard has been sent out from Parliament Street with a private mission. And Mr. Meyer Salmon is one of the many solicitors who do odd jobs for Government.

Just imagine! So Jack has been in the service of the Russian secret police, has he? And has been clumsy and stupid. Poor Jack! And this is the way they treat their servants, is it? So much for your long story about Miss Brown, my dear Dromiroff. I wonder where she is! I shall be better as simple Mrs. Balfour than as any Comtesse de Corallis smothered in diamonds. You are a bad old man, Dromiroff, —a very bad old man. The *bouillabaisse* was very very nice—very nice indeed; but you are a wicked old thief.

As for you, Mr. Legard, I could kiss you, if you were not so young and so aggravatingly self-sufficient. You are a clever man, Mr. Legard,

but there are weak points in your face. Who was she? Take care, or people will one day be asking that question about you. Anyhow, it is a blessing to know that Jack is thoroughly cleared out of the path. And what a dreadful noise Algy dear makes when he sleeps! He will be my third. It is almost sinful to play the martingale on Providence in such a reckless manner. How will it all end?

Rattle! click! click! click! rattle! rattle! click! says the train.

CHAPTER XXII.

Budding Affection.

I MUST have fallen asleep soon after I had heard more than I expected about Mr. Jack, and quite as much as I wanted. The attendant wakes me with the announcement that we are close to Paris. I am dreadfully tired, and not at all myself. I wonder if I am losing my nerve. If so, I am losing it at the very moment when I ought to keep it. I have heard men talk of losing their nerves suddenly—in the hunting field, in a steeplechase, in the face of sudden difficulties. I feel cold and chilly. I feel as if I should like to go to bed for a month, and not be troubled with anything. I feel certain that something dreadful is going to happen to me. I should like to leave Algy altogether, and go away all by myself to some quiet little place where nobody who had known me could ever possibly come. I am thoroughly tired of life. It is horrible. Why was I ever born?

People say that the suburbs of Paris are pretty. They are hateful. There is a dull, gray fog hanging about them. It looks like tobacco smoke, and it smells of mud. We roll past mile upon mile of empty trucks, past gasworks, and factories, and squalid houses, and other such abominations. Only one thing is to clear me. Under no circumstances must Algy see Raymond Guise.

As I am thus meditating, Algy comes up to me. He takes each of my hands in each of his.

"You look tired, dearest," he says. Then he puts each of his great strong hands on my little cheeks, and bends my head back as if I were a child, and kisses me between the eyes. I shall go mad.

"We must have breakfast first," he says, in his most cheerful of English voices, "and then we will go round to the Embassy—see Guise, and then we'll have as pleasant a day as we can. There will be some beastly formalities, of course—declarations of identity—of our age and nationality—of our parents being dead or alive—and of our having been vaccinated—and all the rest of it. But Guise is a capital fellow. He will rattle the things through in no time. What is the matter with you, Lena? You look ill."

How strangely Providence sends chances to us unlucky, helpless women!

I begin to cry. On my word it is no pretence—I can't help crying.

"I feel very ill, Algy," I say. And I take hold of his hand as if I wanted to feel that I had somebody by me to help me. "I don't think it's anything, dear. I am tired and overwrought. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to faint. I never did in my life. But, please don't leave me—not for a minute. Don't go out of my sight."

As I remember this, I see that for once I must have been more like other women than I have sometimes been. I am certain that I touched Algy to the very heart. He made no fuss. Strong men never make a fuss when they are in earnest. He closed his hand in mine, and said:

"All right, Lena. Don't worry yourself." And by this time we are rolling into the station. And our two travelling companions are back getting their luggage together, and all is confusion. Algy is as careful with me as if I were a small child. As soon as the train has stopped he almost carries me into a *voiture*. With incredible rapidity he puts

Félicie under the charge of a railway *employé* that she may see to the details of luggage. And in less than half an hour I am resting on a comfortable sofa at the Hôtel Continental, and Algy is sitting by me, and the room is full of eau-de-cologne, and flowers, and smelling salts, and grapes, and champagne, and all kinds of things which he has ordered in the reckless kind of way men do, on the off chance that some one or the other of them will please me or do me good.

Now, the flowers do really please me, and the champagne really does me good. And Algy forces on me a small sandwich of partridge, and I begin to feel better, and Félicie arrives with the luggage. And now I have my day's work to face.

"Will you go to bed and rest a bit," says Algy, "or will you breakfast? If you think you could rest a few hours, I could go round to the Embassy and bring back Guise with me. Of course you need not see him if you don't feel strong enough?"

"No," I reply; "I will change my things and have some breakfast, if you will promise not to leave the house. Don't go out, dear. I am not quite right yet, and I want to feel that you are within call of me. Don't be angry with me for being so stupid. Things have tired me."

"Angry," he laughs; "the journey was enough to tire any one. I know it has tired me. Go away, my sweet. I won't leave this room until you come back. If you want anything let me know."

I think Félicie has a very adequate notion of the situation. She has never been more quick or more attentive. My toilet is made with a skill that really refreshes me. The cognac, which I have not ordered, makes its appearance without a remark; and in less than half an hour I look ten years younger, but certainly very tired, or, to be more exact, my appearance has in it that indescribable something which is known as interesting.

Breakfast does me no harm. I delay it as long as I can. When it is over, Algy, of course, asks what I am going to do. I purposely leave it to him to ask.

"Do you know, dear," I say, with a suspicion of tremor in my voice, "I still feel a little silly. Let us do nothing to-day. A day is not long, is it? Take me for a drive."

He assents, of course, and we go for the drive. It is about three o'clock, and the sun has at last actually begun to shine. We tell the coachman to go to the Bois. When we get to the *Cascade*, I propose that we should take a stroll, which Algy, after some show of resistance, on the ground of my health, finally assents to. It is clear that the only way of preventing the meeting between Algy and Guise is to get the former out of Paris and back to England. Algy is in a most pliable frame of mind. He is disposed to humour my slightest caprice, because he believes me ill. Besides, I really am ill. I am not acting this time. I feel very wretched and miserably anxious as to the result of all this, and I am sure I show it.

"Algy," I say, "I have one thing to ask you. Just let me have my own way for once. Before long, you know"—and here I give a little feeble laugh—"I shall have to do as you tell me, I suppose. Give me my way now, dear."

Algy has got about him all that bluff, cheery, hearty kind of manner which young Englishmen in good health always have when they are pleased and when things have been going well with them. He has nothing in the world to make him unhappy—at least, nothing that he knows of. So he answers cheerily enough:—

"Why, of course, Lena. What is it?"

"Algy, dear," I say very timidly and, to do myself justice, prettily, "I don't want to be married in Paris. I am English, and I should like to be married in an English church. It was dreadful weather when we got here this morning; and I have odd little fancies of my own about

luck. And I don't like Paris—at least, not for anything of this serious kind." And here I lodge my hand on his great big arm, as if I saw some one coming of whom I was afraid. "Let us be married in dear old England, Algy."

"It will take a fortnight," he objects. "There is always such a bother about the licence."

"Never mind, darling. Be kind to me for once, and I will be very good. I will start with you for England to-night."

"You are not well enough," he says.

"Women have fancies, Algy. I shall be really ill if I stop in Paris. I shall feel better the moment I am in England. I am sure that there will be bad luck if we are not married in an English church."

Now I see that he doesn't like it. He doesn't exactly know what it means. There are some matters in which a man likes to have his own way, especially if he sees no reason why he should not. But I am evidently ill, and presumably fanciful, and Algy is very kind. These great big men always treat women like Newfoundland dogs treat children.

"We must see a doctor first," he says. "You are not strong enough to leave to-night."

"Let me judge of that, dear. Only let us start at once. I have Félicie, you know, and she knows my ways. I am not really so very ill. It is only a little nervousness, and——" here I slip my hand into his, as if I were a little child who wanted him to take me for a walk—"*I am very happy.*"

"All right, my girl," he says. "Have your own way. We'll start at once if you feel well enough when you get back."

And we very soon have got back. And Félicie is doing what little packing has to be done while Algy and I are dining. There is just time to catch the train, and I do not think I need really fear

another encounter. It is impossible that the chances should always go against me. I won't believe it. I have played too often.

Algy is, of course, very kind and attentive to me the whole of the journey, and I am glad of it, as the sea is abominably rough. He is not a fussy man, but yet looks after everything most carefully. I begin to like him better and better every hour, and am almost afraid I shall end by becoming sentimental. We land at Dover, when I am installed at the "Lord Warden," Algy taking up his quarters elsewhere in the town.

Tired, however, as I ought to be, I am so worried and overwrought that I cannot sleep without even more than my usual dose of chloral. But, when I do get to sleep, I do not wake for ten or twelve hours, and so the day is well over before I have roused myself.

Algy makes his appearance at dinner, and over the coffee we discuss our plans. We agree that he shall go up to town, and that I shall go to Farningham and stay at the "Red Lion," so that during the fortnight that must necessarily elapse before our marriage, he can run down and see me every day, if he feels so disposed.

I like Farningham very much. It is a pretty, quiet little place, and I shall not be likely to meet any one whom I know. Besides, the church is very nice. I have often driven past it. It is a small, old-fashioned village church, and I should somehow like to be married there.

Suddenly, however, an idea occurs to me. It will not do to let Algy be too much in town. I must plant him for the fortnight somewhere near me. So I suggest that he should stay at a little village on the outskirts of Farningham, where I know he can lodge at a comfortable farmhouse. I shall thus be able to get him over every morning early, and to lessen the chance of his coming across any one—Jack, for instance,—who might possibly want to make mischief.

Algy not only consents, but is delighted with the suggestion. And

so now at last things are settled, and we are both very happy for the rest of the evening. It is late when he leaves—late, that is to say, for Dover. But again I find I want my chloral.

The cross-country journey next morning to Farningham is pleasant in many ways. In the first place, I avoid the risk of the mail train, in which there would almost certainly have been some one who would know one or the other of us. Then, too, Kent is really very pretty even in mid-winter. It is like Normandy, only, as the Americans say, rather more so.

I wish it were summer. It is so much more pleasant to be married in summer: but, after all, the thing has to be done, and the sooner it is over the better. I know that the worst minute or two you can have with a big salmon are those spent in the supreme achievement of getting him into the boat, and I have been told that there are as a rule no few moments in a voyage more dangerous than those when you are actually entering harbour in bad weather. I am sure it is so in my case. I shall need all my powers of pilotage for the next fortnight.

Farningham looks cheering even in winter. The "Red Lion," is cheerful and cosy, and the lawn in front of it bright and green. The little stream is rippling down merrily, like the brook in that stupid song of Tennyson's. The big chestnut by the bridge is bare of its leaves, of course; but its great limbs show out all the better against the wintry sky.

The landlord makes us wonderfully comfortable. We have a brisk fire with plenty of logs. The cookery may be in the stereotyped style of the English country inn. But it is not at all bad. There is fairly good clear soup, an excellent fowl, a neatly prepared omelette, some pears, and some really good champagne. And after dinner I ensconce myself cosily in a large easy-chair, and Algy occupies another, and lights a cigar. I shall encourage him in smoking, in spite of all that Charles Reade says about it in one of his novels, the name of which I have

forgotten. Men are always gracious and at their best when we allow them to smoke, and, indeed, generally to do as they please. When the cigar is about half over I boldly venture upon a question.

"Algy," I ask, "have you written to your mother yet?"

"Why—no," he answers, nervously. "I hate writing letters. But I will write to-morrow, if you like."

"If you don't mind, Algy dear," I say, "I would rather you did not write at all. Of course, it is for you to decide."

"I am glad of it," he replies. "That's a weight off my mind. You don't know what my mother is. She will be asking a hundred questions, and giving no end of worry and trouble. I do hate that kind of inquisitiveness, don't you?"

Of course, I reply that, except in the case of his mother, I detest it cordially. He laughs merrily.

"You will have to see her soon, you know, and you will judge for yourself. I think I can trust you to hold your own. But you will find her a very tough customer."

"It is a most disrespectful way, sir," I reply, "in which to speak of your own mother," and with that the conversation drops.

"There is another thing, Algy," I say presently. "You see, I know more about it than you do, for I have been married before. We must run up to town, and go to Doctors' Commons and get the licence. I know you will have to make some dreadful sort of declaration that you have lived in the same place for a fortnight, or that I have, or that both of us have, and that we are both of full age, and all that kind of thing. And then, you know, we can get married here as soon as we please. However, there is a fortnight yet, so it does not matter at present, and we can be very comfortable down here."

"Of course we can," he replies, and he throws away his cigar, draws up a footstool, places himself at my feet, and begins to talk in a desultory way about all kinds of things. I like this, because it shows

he is happy, and getting, indeed, positively domesticated. He talks about his place in Scotland and his old mother. He tells me a lot of tiresome stories about his life at Eton, and some, which are rather more interesting, of the good time he had of it in the Queen's Bays. And at last he comes to a topic about which I had always been curious, but had never liked to show myself so.

He tells me about the Balfour jewels, which have been heirlooms in the family for four or five generations. One of his ancestors, it seems, had been ambassador at the Court of Louis XIV., and had married a French girl who was extremely beautiful. He had been very extravagant, and had never cared for money. So, as he dearly loved his wife, his marriage presents in the way of diamonds were something wonderful. The Grand Monarch was more than usually liberal in the way of pearls, and the grandees of his Court all followed suit.

Now, Sir Percy Balfour—that was his name—knew a thing or two, although he had so deeply dipped his estates, and he took particularly good care that all these jewels, which were, even at that time, worth nearly a hundred thousand pounds, should be strictly settled upon his wife, to be handed down as heirlooms in the family, together with the entailed estates. This wise example has since been followed by each successive head of the family. So that the Balfour jewels are now of immense value, and would, in their cases, Algy tells me, fill a couple of good-sized sacks. A queen might envy them, so he says.

This is pleasant hearing; but I expect there will be a bit of a row when the old lady is politely requested to hand them over. They have always remained in her keeping, but since her husband's death she has steadily refused to wear any of them. The old Puritan considers it sinful in a widow to wear jewellery.

Altogether it is a most enjoyable evening. A dreamy lotus-eating, I had almost said, a picturesque evening. The crackling logs throw a flickering light on the panels and pictures and the brightly polished

He throws away his cigar, draws up a footstool, places himself at my feet, and begins to talk in a desultory way about all kinds of things.

furniture. Algy has been at his very best; I hope to Heaven he will always remain so. I declare I am quite sorry when the time comes for him to go. And I take the very greatest care, as he leaves, to make him promise faithfully to be early in the morning.

To turn again to the prosaic facts of life. Hot port wine and water, taken after you have got into bed, is almost as good a narcotic as my dear chloral. Félicie has had long practice in its concoction. I am soon fast asleep, and for once in a way I have a good night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Preparations for my Marriage.

Red Lion Hotel, Farningham.

THE days pass quickly enough at Farningham, and the fortnight is nearly over. Algy, I need not say, has spent most of his time with me. The weather has been delightfully fine, and we have walked and driven all day, and spent the cosy evenings together. I am not ashamed to confess it, I am getting really attached to Algy. He is perfectly devoted to me. He seems to improve daily. He exhibits so much tact, even in the smallest matters of daily life. He is everything that I conceive a man should be. I love him! There it is in black and white.

Last evening I felt almost inclined to throw myself at his feet and tell him all. But my love was not quite strong enough to risk that. I knew, of course, what the result would be. And I could not lose him now. Self-interest has at last lost its place in my heart. All I think of, all that absorbs my soul, is the great love that has sprung up in my heart for this man. I worship him, and my affection for him only falls short at one point, and that is, telling him the truth and consequently losing him.

He was compelled to go up to town three days ago. I cannot find words to express my agony of mind until he returned. Great Heavens! I thought, if he should only find out something about me and throw me over! The anxiety was maddening. I feared his being away, and

I feared his return. But when I met him at the station, and saw the look of pleasure on his dear face at the sight of her he loved, I knew that all was right. I cannot, and will not, trust him out of my sight again, except at his farmhouse quarters, where there is not a cat he knows, and where no danger can possibly exist.

And after we are married I must trust to my wit to prevent his hearing the truth about me, and to my influence over him to prevent his believing it if he does hear it. That I must chance. But marry him I will. And, bad as I may have been—and I have never endeavoured in your pages, my dear diary, to gloss over my shortcomings—I will make him a good wife, and I will make him happy, as only a woman of the world can make her husband.

What a strange alteration has taken place in me! Here is a man that I used to ridicule, that I did not care a snap of the finger for, that I robbed of his *fiancée*, that I plotted to get money from, that for the sake of whose position, and the wealth and power it would give me, I have schemed to marry—and oh! how successfully. Here is a man, I say, that I would willingly take without a farthing, and live with him in a little house on the small income that I possess.

Women are strange creatures. At least I feel that I am. All this is not gush. It is the real, honest truth. And if it were not for my apprehensions, I should be the happiest woman in England.

The day after to-morrow I am going up to London to get the licence, and the day after that we shall be married. I had some little difficulty in arranging this plan with Algy. He thought that there was no reason why I should take a tiring journey, when he could manage things equally well. But I talked him over, and gave him one or two good reasons, or, at any rate, unanswerable ones, and, as usual, I got my own way.

I wonder where Jack is. I hope and trust that I shall not come across him during the few hours I am in London. I shan't risk going

to my house in Curzon Street. I shall take Félicie up with me, and she can go there and see the woman in charge and get my letters.

Somehow or other I still fear Jack. In spite of what Dromiroff said and did, I don't believe I am safe from him. He is desperate, I expect, and would stick at nothing. He never did stick at much. And he must hate me for having so thoroughly defeated him, and got the best of him. And he would kill me, if he could. I know Jack *jusqu'au bout des ongles.* And I know what a demon he is. I would willingly give him a thousand, or even two, to make him safe. But he would take the money and then come for more. And I should be blackmailed to the end of the chapter. No, I must defy him, and let him do his worst. I think that I should murder him if he succeeded in separating me from Algy.

I had such a horrid dream last night. I was walking alone in a thick wood, where the undergrowth was dense and the boughs interlaced overhead and shut out the light. It was like that horrible wood in Shelley's *Sensitive Plant.* One knows how things get mixed up in one's dreams—how two things are at once the same thing, and yet retain their own identity, much as Lilith, Adam's other wife, of whom Rossetti is so fond, was both snake and woman, or as that fearful individual, in *Undine,* is both demon and water torrent.

The trees and bushes seemed to be living creatures,—noisome, venomous things with eyes and teeth, and long, shiny arms like an octopus. And they bent towards me as I passed—that is to say, the bushes did—and tried to entangle me. And the trees dipped down from above, as if to clutch me. And the ground was dank and livid, and the air thick and heavy.

And then I suddenly saw a great beast in my way, like some huge toad, hideously speckled, warty, horribly repulsive. And, in my dream, it was a toad and yet it was Jack Fortinbras, and it was Jack Fortinbras and yet it was a toad. And it stood in my

path, glaring and mowing, and the slaver dripping from its diabolical mouth.

Then I had a strange kind of courage come upon me that seemed to make me as strong as a man, and I faced the brute, and I was going to attack it, literally to hurl myself at it, when there was a great flash of light, and everything seemed to clear away, and I saw nothing but the light, and Algy in it, coming towards me. And then the light became more intense, and I could see nothing for it —not even Algy.

And I felt that I was falling, falling, falling, with the intense blinding light all round me. And then I seemed to experience a great shock and jerk, and woke up with my teeth set and my hands clenched, and trembling violently.

That was my dream.

Félicie hurried in from her little room, which leads out of mine, terribly alarmed. I had shrieked so loudly, it seems, that I woke her up. For the first time in my life I saw her frightened. She knocked up the landlady, and got brandy, and rubbed my hands, and sponged my forehead, and put hot water to my feet, and after awhile I got better. But she was still anxious, and refused to leave the room. And I believe she would have insisted on sending for the village doctor, only that, after awhile, I fell into that kind of stupor, something more than sleep, which always follows intense exertion.

I have heard that prisoners in the olden time used to fall into it after they had been tortured, or that else they would certainly have died.

Heaven knows what my dream may mean, or whether indeed it means anything, or is in any way more than the result of intense anxiety and overstrung nerves. It was no ordinary dream. I should go mad if I had such a dream every night. I feel cold now when I think of it. And what did its end mean? Surely the glorious flood of sudden

light, and the appearance of Algy, and the disappearance of the abominably deformed reptile, cannot portend me evil. Let me hope not. I wish I could pray not. Anyhow, I will do my best to banish the whole thing from my mind.

I have one more happy day with Algy, and I then go up to get the licence. My own solicitor meets me at Cannon Street, and takes me direct to Doctors' Commons. He pilots me through the formalities, which, under his guidance, do not take very long. I make the necessary affidavit before a very shabby, dirty man, who is eating a mutton chop in a most filthy room, and who has the impudence to shake hands with me and to wish me happiness. Then we go to another office, where an immense seal is stamped and tied on to a bit of parchment. This is the licence, and they kindly give it me in a small tin box for better security. And my solicitor sees me off again in Félicie's charge. It is a comfort to be fairly on my way back.

Among the letters Félicie has brought from Curzon Street there is not one from Jack, but there are at least half a dozen frantic appeals from poor Sir Thomas. And there is one from Dromiroff, dated from Monte Carlo, and to this curt effect :—

"Dear Madame Despard,—I hope the salubrious air of Kent is doing you good. I have written to Curzon Street instead of to Farningham for reasons of my own.

"Write to me, if you wish, but you have no immediate cause for any apprehension."

What a marvellous man he is! He appears to know all my movements. I feel certain now that I might safely have ventured to Curzon Street myself. And yet I went to Cannon Street instead of Charing Cross because there was less danger of coming across Jack.

* * * * * *

I have got back again safely and without any adventure worth

chronicling. My sole travelling companions were an elderly young lady, evidently a spinster, who criticized me unsparingly with a most relentless and unsympathetic stare, until she got out at a station some half-hour from London; and a very young officer, who could not have been more than nineteen. This young gentleman preserved a studious silence until the lady I have referred to withdrew her virgin charms. Then he immediately attempted to plunge into conversation. At first, I am afraid, I did not give him much encouragement, but he was a nice-looking boy, with fair hair and fresh complexion, and plenty of impudence, and lots to say; so I gradually emerged from my shell, and within twenty minutes of Minerva's departure we were very good friends. He was in the Scots Guards, he said, and was quartered at the Tower.

Would I like to come to lunch there, and see over the Tower? I could, of course, bring any friends I liked.

No, I was much obliged, but afraid I could not manage it, at any rate, at present.

"I am so disappointed," he said. "However, if you change your mind, send me a line. This is my card. I'm only away on three days' leave."

I took the card and looked at it—Lord Hambledon, whose father, Lord Hampshire, I know so well, and who made such love to me at Pau three years ago. I never knew old Hampshire had such a handsome son. I am sure the boy doesn't take much after his father.

"Where do you get out?" asked Lord Hambledon.

"At Farningham," I replied.

"So do I. I am going to stay with some people near there who have got a big shoot coming off to-morrow. We can't by any happy chance be going to the same house, can we? I am going to the Moneys. Young Money is my great chum. He is in the Blues."

"No, I am not going to the Moneys."

"Where then?" he asked. "I know most of the sportsmen about these parts."

"You won't know the people with whom I am staying," I said. "I am down here for a few hours on a pure matter of business, and am then returning to town."

"May I write to you?"

"Good Heavens, no! Most certainly not!"

"Well, there's no harm in giving me your name and address."

"There is every harm," I said; "and please don't bother me."

"All right. If you put it in that way, of course I won't. Only I should so like to see you again."

"What for?" I could not help inquiring.

"Because you're so pretty, and so jolly, and just my sort."

"You're a very impudent young man, and I decline to have any further conversation with you. Not that I can very well, for here we are."

In another half-minute the train had stopped at Farningham.

"I am sure to see you again," said Lord Hambledon. "If I particularly set my mind on anything, it generally comes off."

"Yours must have been a very profound experience," I replied. "Good-bye."

"For the present," he answered, "good-bye."

I am alighting from the carriage, when Algy came up and took me by the hand, assisting me on to the platform.

"Hullo, Balfour! How are you, old sportsman?" called out Lord Hambledon, cheerily.

"How d'ye do?" answered Algy, freezingly, apparently not relishing the fact that I have travelled down from town with this feather-brained young guardsman.

"Where are you staying, Balfour? I heard you were abroad. Some men were saying so at White's yesterday."

"I am staying with the Bishop, my dear fellow, where I am afraid

I am not likely to meet you," said Algy, evidently determined to put his questioner off the scent.

"No, you're certainly not. Bishops are a little above my form. I don't think that I should be very comfortable with a bishop. Well, good-bye, old chap."

"Good-bye," said Algy, and Hambledon disappeared.

"Did that young fool come down from London with you?" asks my future lord.

Algy is certainly of a jealous disposition. But I don't mind that. It only shows that he cares for me. And I don't want him to be a bit different. I love him as he is, from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

"Yes, dear, and he was very civil and attentive."

"Young ass!" growls Algy. "I suppose you know who he is?"

"Not I," I answer, frightened into a lie, dreading as I do to offend Algy. For I know he would be offended if he knew that Lord Hambledon and I had become so familiar on so short an acquaintance.

"Well, he's Lord Hambledon, Hampshire's son, and will have eighty thousand a year. And he'll probably come into it soon, for I'm told Hampshire can't last long."

A few months ago, how I should have jumped at this news, and laid my plans to effect the easy capture of this gilded fish. Now I am thoroughly altered, and whether Lord Hambledon's future income will be eighty thousand a year or eighty pence is a matter of supreme indifference to me. My sole thought is Algy. We find our way back to the hotel, and are soon sitting down to the last dinner we shall ever eat together before we become man and wife.

Algy appears in the highest spirits, and looks the picture of happiness. I, on the contrary, feel most constrained, although, of course, I am in the seventh heaven of delight at the prospect of being so soon united

to Algy, and of ending peacefully and quietly a life which has been, to say the least of it, somewhat chequered and stormy.

We sit together after dinner and discuss the programme of the morrow. Algy has seen the clergyman, and has fixed for the marriage to take place at eleven. Nobody knows of it except the parson, the clerk, Algy, myself, and of course Félicie. We do not want the whole village to turn out, or to have the bells rung, or to make any kind of silly demonstration. Algy is to come over as usual, and we are to walk out together as if we were going for one of our usual morning strolls.

I do not think that even the landlord has an idea of what is in the air. And yet landlords are keen judges of human nature.

And now I wish to put on record a very singular thing. Some strange sort of change is coming over me. I have said, or at any rate implied, over and over again, that with one exception, I never really cared for any one, but that, in spite of myself, I have got to love Algy passionately. Also, I begin to awake to the idea that I have got something suspiciously like a conscience; just as I have often heard that men, when past middle life, discover that they "have a liver," or that they "have bones," or in some other way become aroused to the fact that they are after all only human, and very much like other men.

It occurs to me sometimes that I am treating Algy very wickedly. Only fancy my using such a word. I feel as if I ought to tell him all that took place at the Gages, and, indeed, all my past life. It is clear that I am deceiving him, and it is clear, also, that, sooner or later, he will find out the whole truth.

Now, a month ago I should have faced this contingency calmly. My sole subject then was to become Mrs. Balfour. That achieved, I should have been absolutely indifferent to whatever might have followed. It is another matter now. I love Algy for his own sake, and without the least regard for his position and his wealth. If I were to lose his

love I really think it would kill me. It is a dreadful position in which to be placed.

Here we are, sitting together in front of the crackling fire. Algy is smoking, and has a brandy-and-soda. I have my cup of coffee, and am plaiting the edge of my pocket-handkerchief. We have settled everything that needs settling, and we are talking about nothing at all. The impulse to make a clean breast of it almost maddens me. As it happens, however, instincts of prudence prevail. Let me formulate my reasons.

In the first place, if I blurt out everything now, I shall be making a stupendous sacrifice to truth and to the other moralities. But I shall certainly never become Mrs. Balfour. And to become Mrs. Balfour is in itself a clear gain. Secondly, I am very happy at present. It is a sin to disturb so gloriously golden a dream. And, besides, the longer Algy lives with me the more he will be sure to love me, and the less likely will he be to resent the lover's stratagem I employed to secure him, vile though I admit it was.

It is true that, at the time, it was no lover's stratagem at all, but a deliberate and cold-blooded piece of plotting. This, however, Algy is never likely to ascertain. Whatever may come out, and whatever he may believe, he will, I am sure, give me credit for having loved him from the very first as sincerely as I do now.

Then, too, the more time goes on, the more people forget things. Every month heals the wound in unhappy Miss Vyse's heart. Scandals are forgotten. Awkward stories die out. I have noticed over and over again that the whole world changes itself entirely in a very few years. If I can once get married to Algy, and somehow or another manage to keep things from him for a year or two, all will be right. And so, in the long run, the policy of cowardice and procrastination prevails. And when Algy leaves, I throw my arms round his neck and kiss him as heartily and with as much apparent innocence as if I had not a single secret from him in the world.

It is arranged that he is to come here at ten o'clock to-morrow, and before noon everything will be over. I do not think there is any fear of any unpleasant visitor appearing on the scene. I am certain that Algy has given his address to no one, and he has told me that he has not had a letter since we have been here. So I retire to bed in a frame of mind more or less comfortable, and, in spite of the critical nature of the moment, sleep calmly, soundly, and refreshingly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Balfour Castle at Last.

Bedford Hotel, Brighton.

OUR wedding morning was simply lovely. It was more like a day in June than in January. The sun came out and lit up everything. Even the red tiles on the long ranges of stables and cowsheds and outhouses were gilded with his light. The roads were firm and hard. I remember that on the lawn in front of the house, as it slopes down to the little Darent, were some old stock roses, and on one of them there was actually a large rose in blossom.

I had risen early, and was dressed so as to be ready for Algy. A woman may be pardoned for dwelling on her dress when she is about, for the first time in her life, to be married to the man she loves. Let me briefly describe it. It was a small shepherd's plaid silk, very plainly cut, and looking as if it were made for travelling. Over this I wore a tight-fitting jacket made by Robinson and McBain, the only people who really know how to cut a habit or a jacket properly. Round my neck I had tied in a dainty knot a small shawl of lace—an old gift of Lady Gage's. My black bonnet was a creation of Maria Hamm's, of the Rue de la Paix, and showed to the utmost advantage my chestnut hair, which, by the way, is wonderfully thick over my temples. In the bonnet was my only ornament—a white moss rose-bud.

I was pacing up and down the gravel walk between the Darent

and the lawn, with Félicie at my heels, and had almost reached the little summer-house by the chain that swings over the stream, when I heard Algy's step coming towards me from under the chestnut tree. I turned round immediately. He came up without saying anything. It is a curious thing about strong men that, when they are really in earnest and mean business, they never talk. Frenchmen are, perhaps, exceptions to this rule. But the one great Frenchman, Napoleon, is a standing proof of it. After all, though, he was a Corsican. And pondering over these things there come hurriedly into my head all the old stories about vendetta, and I think of Jack, and a sort of chill shivers through me.

Algy comes striding along the gravel with his great heavy step, and takes my arm. Here let me say that I like a man who takes your arm instead of offering his arm to you. To begin with, you really get more support, and, besides this, the man, as it were, is playing Hercules to your Omphale. Also the thing is brotherly and confidential.

He leads me off the path, across the closely mown grass, to where is growing the one red rose of which I have spoken. He snaps it from its stalk, unfastens one button in my jacket, arranges the rose in the buttonhole, and fastens the button again, so as to keep the flower in its place. No *bouquetière* could have done the thing more deftly. Then he puts a great heavy hand on each shoulder, and stands towering above me, and looking down into my eyes. And then he puts both hands under my chin and, as is his wont, tilts back my head, and kisses me.

And now comes what I cannot help thinking is a most critical moment in my life. Algy's kiss is still hot on my lips. The dints his big fingers have made under my little chin have not yet died out. His great, big, blue eyes are staring full at me, and I can see myself in them as clearly as in a looking-glass.

"Algy," I say, "I have something to tell you."

"There's not much time," he answers, with a sort of Newfoundland dog roughness; "the parson is probably shivering in the vestry. We had better be off."

It must be now or never.

"Algy," I repeat, "there is something that I must tell you before we go. I cannot help it if it changes your mind altogether. I *must* tell it you, whatever comes of it. It is about what happened just before I went to the Riviera, and while you were engaged to Miss——"

"Oh!" says he dictatorially, "I know all about that. Let the dead bury their dead. You and I begin life to-day. Come, Lena, it's time for church."

And, with this remark, he again takes my arm and marches me through the little gate out of the garden.

In front of us is the mill-tail. Immediately behind us is the glorious old chestnut, with its great boughs spreading out as if it knew that it were alive, gloried in its strength, and were meditating on the gigantic burst of blossom into which it was to break out next spring.

Beyond the 'Red Lion,' with its red tiles on which the pigeons are clustering, lies the church. A wedding is a rare event at Farningham, and when Algy arranged matters with the clerk, that venerable functionary suggested that the bells should be rung, and mentioned ten shillings as a proper honorarium for the bell-ringers. Dear old Algy gave him a sovereign on the distinct understanding that the bell-ringers were to keep away. So we entered the church altogether unnoticed, and somehow or other, before I have realized where I am or what I am doing, the service has begun.

Strangely enough, I can remember at this moment every incident of my first two marriages,—the bridesmaids and their dresses, the pattern of the lockets, the features of the clergymen, the colour of the horses, and every other minute detail. Of this, my third marriage, I remember nothing distinctly. I just recollect the words, "for better for worse, for

richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part," and I know, in a misty kind of way, that I signed the register. I remember nothing more till I found myself on Algy's arm, at the door of the 'Red Lion.' There was a carriage waiting for Algy and myself, and another for Félicie and the luggage. Algy had paid the bill before he came to me in the garden. There was nothing to do but to start. The landlord bowed his acknowledgments, and did his best to look as if he had no idea of what had happened. There must have been talk in the tap-room that evening.

At the station I again found evidence of Algy's thoughtfulness. A compartment had been reserved for us. When we reached Charing Cross there were carriages to take us to Victoria, and, in almost less time than it has taken to write these lines, we were rattling down to Brighton.

"For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death us do part." These are the words that kept ringing in my ears.

And, as once before, rattle, click, click, rattle, rattle, on goes the train.

* * * * * *

During our journey we have come across no one that we knew. I fancied once, just as I was taking a last look at the platform at Victoria, that I noticed some one very like that young idiot Hambledon. It may have been he or it may not. Anyhow, the train started, and off we went.

We find Brighton much as it always is in January. There are the same octogenarians, the same old maids and widows with their fancied ailments, and the same money-making crew of fashionable doctors to minister to their weaknesses; the same curates, and the same attendance of members of the Semitic persuasion. But the rooms at the 'Bedford' are extremely comfortable; and as the evening closes

in, and the fire begins to roar up the chimney, I, for my part, have never felt more thoroughly happy. Algy is no longer my guest. He will never leave me. We two are one.

Our decision to spend the honeymoon at Brighton was the result of several discussions. Algy had suggested that we should go up to Scotland without delay, but I could not agree to that. I wanted him to myself for a little time; and then, again, I didn't much relish the idea of meeting of his fierce old mother. Algy's descriptions of that venerable dame are not reassuring. We are sure to quarrel, we are sure to have a desperate fight. She has been mistress of Balfour Castle for so long that she will give but a scant welcome to her son's wife, and will certainly regard her as an intruder. I am not in the least afraid of the combat nor of its result. But these sort of encounters are extremely disagreeable, especially in cold weather, and I want to put this one off as long as I possibly can.

Then Algy proposed that we should return to Paris. This I should not have minded, only I could see that he really did not care about it, and merely threw out the idea because he thought I should like it. So I told him I would rather stop in England, and after several places had been mentioned and negatived, Brighton was at last decided upon, and here we are.

I now make Algy write to his mother without further delay, and announce our marriage. He does not know how to break the news, and destroys about a dozen sheets of paper in his endeavour to concoct an epistle that will mollify old Mrs. Balfour, of whom he evidently stands in great awe. His attempts proving utterly futile, I come to the rescue, and we jointly indite the following letter, which Algy copies and sends off:—

"*Bedford Hotel, Brighton, January 25th.*

"DEAREST MOTHER,—You will, I am sure, be happy to know that I have married Mrs. Despard, a lady to whom I have been for some

time sincerely attached. I have been roaming about Europe, or I should have seen you before. When we next see each other I hope that my choice will meet with your approval. I am certain that you will find your new daughter anxious to anticipate your wishes and to yield you the deference to which you are entitled.

"For my part, dearest mother, my marriage is the best thing that has happened to me for many a year. We are stopping, as you will see, at Brighton. Will you tell James to have all the horses thoroughly exercised, and to have anything that may be wanted done to the mail phaeton? Our marriage was so sudden that I had really no time to write to you about it; but I am sure you will never think that I have been wanting in proper respect to yourself.

"Ever, your affectionate son,

"ALGY."

The letter having been despatched, Algy and I saunter on to the Parade. There is the usual crowd extending from the Pier to the end of the Green, and we are soon in the midst of it.

Almost the first person we stumble upon is Lady Damer. She rushes up to me breathlessly.

"My dear, whatever has become of you? You haven't answered one of my letters. Nobody has heard anything of you for an age."

"Pray forgive me," I reply. "I have been away, and I got your letters altogether only a day or two ago. I was just going to write to you. But let me introduce you to my husband, Mr. Balfour. Algy, this is my oldest friend, Lady Damer."

Lady Damer is a person of such vast experience that it takes a good deal to astonish her, and of my entire acquaintance she of all others possesses that wonderful "repose" which Tennyson speaks of, that repose which no shock of joy or sorrow or surprise can break through. But I can see that my announcement has completely electrified her, and she

has a great deal of difficulty in repressing the exclamation of wonderment that is on her lips.

She only says, "Let me congratulate you, darling, a thousand times. How sly you have been to keep all this to yourself!" Then, turning to my husband, "How do you do? I think I had the pleasure of meeting you at Ostend. You are a very fortunate man, Mr. Balfour, as I have no doubt you know perfectly well yourself. Lena is my ideal of what a wife should be."

This is very handsome of Lady Damer, and I feel correspondingly grateful. Algy returns some civil and appropriate answer, and we separate with mutual promises to call upon each other.

"I've oceans of news to tell you, Lena, and if you'll let me, I'll come and see you about five to-morrow," says Lady Damer, in bidding us *au revoir*.

When we return to the hotel, I find something that rather puzzles me, and that makes me, as the Americans would say, "put on my considering cap." It is a letter in a hand which I recognize at once. It is addressed to "Madame Balfour, Bedford Hotel, Brighton."

Now, seeing that I have only been married a little over twenty-four hours, and that we had not fixed on Brighton until two days before our wedding, I am a little puzzled to conjecture how dear old Dromiroff can possibly have discovered my whereabouts. Anyhow, he has done so, and his letter is most diplomatic. It is obviously written so that I may leave it lying about. He tells me that he has only just heard of my approaching marriage, and that he wishes myself and Mr. Balfour every possible happiness. He then suggests that if Algy is fond of big game, there are parts of Russia where the bear and the wild boar are still to be found, and he intimates, in the most cautious manner possible, that he can give Algy any amount of shooting over the Czar's forest. The letter concludes with these words, "Many of our English acquaintances have left the Riviera. Some are gone to

Venezuela, or some such place. Receive, Madame, the assurances of my most distinguished consideration, and convey the same to Mr. Balfour, whom fortune has so singularly favoured."

This man Dromiroff is a puzzle to me. I am not exactly afraid of him, and yet he has over me a most extraordinary power of control. He obviously wishes me to understand that for the present, at any rate, Fortinbras can be trusted to do me no harm. This is reassuring. When Dromiroff says anything I know I can rely upon it; and he now evidently wishes me to understand that he is taking a paternal interest in my welfare.

* * * * * *

Brighton is tiresome even with Lady Damer here. I do not feel at all inclined to stop. Besides, there is nothing to do. Algy and I have all the money that we can possibly want, and we ought to enjoy ourselves. Brighton is, somehow or the other, abominably dull. I cannot understand it, for I delight in Brighton, as a rule. There is the Chain Pier, on which no living creature ever ventures; and there is the West Pier, and there is the Parade, and there is the beach, with its shingle, upon which no one ever walks; and there is a great array of shops; but there is nothing to do.

Now, if Algy would charter a steam yacht, we could laugh at the Bay of Biscay, and drop down into the Mediterranean. The Riviera about this time is delightful, far preferable to last month.

Or we might even take a run to New York and so from New York to Jamaica, where we should get fresh pineapples and all kinds of curious fish. There are many places I should like to see. Why should we not go to Venice, or to Cairo, or to some of the quaint old Continental cities which I have never seen—places such as Bruges, or Ghent, or Haarlem? While we are about it, why should we not go to Rio, or even to San Francisco? I feel a curious sort of desire to see

places I have never seen, and to have Algy all to myself while we are seeing them.

I meet Algy at breakfast a few days after our arrival in this frame of mind. The rain is coming down in torrents. It is idle to think of going outside the doors.

"I have had a letter from my mother," he says, and he throws it over to me.

"Don't mind her, Lena," he goes on; "she always had a hasty temper, and, after all, we have treated her rather cavalierly. What is it they say? —A man must leave his mother, and his grandmother, and his mother-in-law, and cleave unto his wife. Don't be afraid, dear; just read it."

I know something of my own sex, but this letter fairly amuses me. The old lady begins by reminding Algy that he is her only child. She then says that she is not long for this world, and adds that the foot-and-mouth disease has broken out in the home-farm. He is old enough to please himself, but it would have made her happier if she had been consulted in the matter. There is no dower house to Balfour Castle, and she does not suppose that we wish her to take lodgings in Edinburgh. She has heard that I have been twice married and have had no children. She could have wished he had chosen a younger woman (this really makes me very angry). She does not expect to live for many years, but should be sorry if Balfour Castle should go out of the family. The Castle is being done up, and she has sent to her bankers for the plate. She has given James his orders. The family jewels are all safe. Donald Cameron is in arrears with his rent. It is a pity the moor was not let. It was poached terribly, and she believes the keepers were parties in the matter. She hopes I will bring my own maid, and that I shall understand how simply matters are managed in a Scotch house. The snow is very deep, or she would have more news of the neighbours. No doubt there are some among them who know me. So the letter ends.

"Well?" I say to Algy.

"Well!" he answers. "This is a bit of business that sets me thinking of a turkey or a duck. You must break the neck of the beastly thing and have done with it. The weather at Balfour can't be worse than it is here. Let us rattle up there at once, stay a few days in the snow, and then run off before the people about there come to bother us. Come here, Lena." He beckoned to me, and I cross over to him. He pulls me down on his knees, and drags my head towards him until my mouth and chin are nestling on his neck. I could die for this man.

"Look here, my child," he says, stroking down my hair as if he were smoothing tangles out of it. "Look here, darling, we will get this business over, and get it over sharp. We will run up to Balfour for four or five days. If you cannot hold your own with the old lady, you must sham ill, and avoid discussion, and keep to your rooms, if necessary. After we have stopped there just as long as is necessary, I will have a yacht ready for us at Leith. Do things at once. I am off now to arrange the carriage for us. I shall be back in an hour. Tell Félicie to pack."

Then he lifts me up, and as I stand in front of him, gives me a great kiss between the eyes. Then he takes my two hands and shakes them both—as I have somewhere heard is the custom of emperors. Then, in the most prosaic manner, he produces a cigar, and asks me to hand him a light. And so he strolls away.

* * * * * *

Balfour Castle, N.B.

Let me hurry over little details. Before the day is two-thirds gone, Algy and I are in London, and we leave by the night express for Balfour Castle. The rain has stopped, and a heavy dew is falling. I am so well wrapped up that I do not feel the cold. Algy has ensconced me in rugs and furs until I feel as if I were hybernating.

He stretches himself out opposite me and lights a huge pipe. Then we begin to talk of all manner of things.

It is very curious, but I really believe that this is the first time that I have ever been married. I can talk to Algy about anything.

Rattle, rattle, click, clack, rattle, goes the train, till we stop at Carlisle.

Then, while Félicie is handing me a cup of coffee, the station-master comes up, and, respectfully touching the leather of his cap, hands in a telegram for Mrs. Balfour. Algy looks on with a lazy indifference—a mixture of good-nature, perfect confidence, and drowsiness. The telegram, however, has some interest for me. Dromiroff again! How on earth can he have calculated on catching me at Carlisle?

The telegram is to the following effect:—

"You may have trouble at Balfour Castle. If so, wire me, Claridge's, London. Be bold. Yours, Dromiroff."

What this may mean I cannot conjecture. So I actually resign myself to sleep. A journey in a comfortable carriage is by no means unpleasant. The movement of the train rocks you. You are warm, and indolent. And so the train rattles on until, to my sudden surprise, I find myself at Balfour Bridge Station.

A close carriage is waiting for Algy and myself, and there is a big waggonette for the luggage, and everybody is touching his bonnet to Algy, who is evidently a sort of feudal king in these parts. The drive is short, and it is glorious to find one's self in a large room with a tremendous wood fire.

"My mother," says Algy, "does not come down until late in the day. Dinner is at eight. Go to bed, my child, for a few hours and dream."

The raw Scotch air and the long journey have made me feel as heavy as if I had taken a double dose of my favourite chloral. I fall

asleep under Félicie's hands. The bed is an immense one. I am lost in it. The wood is sputtering and crackling in the grate. The walls are panelled with black oak. Here and there are pictures of forgotten Balfours, in strange costumes, with ruffles and claymores, and feathers in their hats. But there is abundance of waxen tapers, and there are large mirrors here and there to light the great chamber up. And so I bury my head in the pillow.

This is Balfour Castle, and it is actually my own house; for the old lady is only here upon sufferance. I have had hard times of it. I have had to fight my way, single-handed, against all the world. Men and women, both alike, have been treacherous to me. Heaven only knows! Can I be blamed for playing my own hand? At last I have got everything I wish for. I am rich even without Algy—rich on my Monte Carlo winnings. With Algy's fortune, I can face society, bully it, and dictate to it. People like Lady Damer will intrigue for the *entrée* of my London house. I shall have them all at my feet. They will be round me, from bishops to boys in the Blues, and from Secretaries of State to rising barristers.

And the best of it is that I am no longer deceiving my own soul. When I first began to measure foils with Algy I looked upon him as a good-natured fool, who was probably good for money if he were asked for it in the proper way. Now I am proud to be his wife, and while I am thinking all this he comes and coils the eider-down quilt round my neck and face, and stoops for a kiss, and tells me that he is going down to have a look at the home farm, and that I may go to sleep with an easy mind, for he himself will see that I get up in time for dinner. And so I begin to doze and to dream. There is the warmth of the room, there is the glorious fire on the hearth, there are the old Balfours looking down upon me from the walls. The light from the tapers is flashed about from mirror to mirror. It is splendidly warm.

I am almost too happy and too lazy to even try to go to sleep.

She advances to meet me very graciously. "I am glad," she says, "to welcome you here, my daughter."

And then one of the pictures begins to look very like Jack. And there is an old lady with a starched ruff and stomacher, and I somehow fancy she must be Mrs. Balfour; and this is odd, because starched ruffs and stomachers must have gone out of fashion long before Mrs. Balfour was even born. Besides, how could there possibly be a picture of Jack in the room. Anyhow, I am rid of him. This is my own room in my own house, and if Mrs. Balfour put on forty ruffles and four hundred stomachers, I need not be afraid of her.

I think I shall make up to her, and kiss her, and tell her everything. Not exactly everything, you know, but enough to make her believe herself wiser than anybody else. And I will talk to her about all kinds of things, and I will ask her advice, whether I want it or not. She must be fond of Algy. Any woman would be proud of such a son.

And if she is fond of him it will be easy enough to manage her. All I have to do is to fit myself into my place as comfortably as I am fitting myself into these great pillows of eider-down.

I have been a fool. I have wasted the best part of my life. I hate the old schemes. I was a fool to dirty my hands with men like Jack. It is as easy to run straight as to run crooked; and it is much more pleasant. Anyhow, I am safe in harbour now. Algy will be back before long. Félicie must do my hair plainly. I will wear the black velvet, with the old point lace. Pearl earrings, only my wedding ring and one other. I shall not want colour after the journey. And I can talk about the room. Say how nice it was. How I like a wood fire. And the old pictures and the black oak. When will Algy come? I am very sleepy and very happy.

* * * * * *

Algy wakes me as he promised. Dear Algy! I am fully myself. The delicious sleep in this great bed has been better than all the chloral in the world. While Félicie is finishing my toilette, he stands in front of the fire and talks to me. The picture I thought like Jack is one

which he hates. It is the portrait of a Balfour whose title to the name was doubtful, and who was suspected of having aided in the betrayal of Montrose. There the picture is, and there it has got to stop, but Algy would sooner it were away.

There is a great hall in Balfour Castle with windows of stained glass, and antlered heads of deer, and suits of armour, and great oak settles, and banners, and an immense roof. At the end of the hall is a daïs, and out of the daïs is the private dining-room. Here I meet Mrs. Balfour.

She is a tall, upright woman, who must once have been very handsome. Her hair is perfectly preserved and very thick, but as white as the snow upon the moors. She is dressed in black silk with rare old Mechlin lace that must be of fabulous value.

She advances to meet me very graciously. "I am glad," she says, "to welcome you here, my daughter. Algernon is old enough to choose for himself. We shall see more of one another. You must be tired with your journey to-day, and so we will defer our talk. I hope you will like the Castle. It is unchanged since I first knew it, more than fifty years ago."

And so this is the terrible old woman against whom I have been warned. But then one never can tell. Artfulness grows with age. The velvet glove hides an iron gauntlet. Anyhow, I mean to be extremely careful.

The dinner is good, dull, and solemn. I am quite aware that the old lady is watching me, and I eat very little, and limit myself to water coloured with claret. There is some self-denial in this, for the dinner is of true Scotch type. Salmon, grouse, cutlets of roe venison, and all that infinite variety of strange dishes that so bewilder a visitor to the Highlands. The claret would be magnificent if I could only get at it.

After dinner, we all three withdraw to Mrs. Balfour's own room.

Here tea and coffee are brought in. We loiter about a little and talk of the views in the neighbourhood, and the foot-and-mouth disease, and the recent flood which did so much damage, and the chances of a heavy drift of snow, and the necessity of putting fresh lead on the west wing of the stables, and then the old lady rings for her maid, and I, with an affectionate good-night, retire to my room. Algy follows me and rings the bell, making some sort of signal by its intonation.

Immediately appears a gray-headed butler, who, after receiving some brief orders in unintelligible Doric, bows his exit. In a few minutes he respectfully reappears, and we follow him a few paces down the corridor. What a room! It is ornamented with every possible trophy of the chase. There are head, not of deer alone, but of seal and fox and badger. The wax tapers throw their light upon glorious specimens of eagle and osprey and falcon. In the niches, recesses, and corners of the panelling are rods and rifles and otter spears. There are curling-stones and skates and snow-shoes; and every here and there is the head of some favourite horse, under which hangs the bridle he was last ridden in.

"This is my room," says Algy, "and yours, darling, whenever you like, and here is supper."

And there was supper, which the butler had brought in a butler's tray. Hot salmon, cutlets, cold grouse, beetroot salad, a cabinet pudding, claret, champagne, and some quaint old Dutch bottles in a quaint Dutch basket. I felt myself *châtelaine* of Balfour Castle. Evidently, the old butler considered me so.

And when supper was over, and Algy stretched himself out and lit his big pipe with its long stem of albatross bone, I sat down on the bearskin in front of the fire and laid my head upon his knees and burst out crying. I was, simply, so very happy.

CHAPTER XXV.

Reappearance of my Evil Genius.

Balfour Castle, N.B.

THE next two or three days are bitterly cold. The snow has fallen deeply, and when it ceased falling, the keen frost set in; but the Castle is deliciously warm and comfortable. It has never been a castle in the proper sense of the word, but it is powerfully built, and could, I dare say, have stood a siege for some days in the old times, before heavy artillery came into use. The walls are immensely thick, with deep-set windows. Of the fireplaces I have spoken already. There are long galleries in which you can warm your blood with a brisk walk, if the weather keeps you in, and my own rooms are exquisite.

I never realized fully until now all the enjoyment that is to be got out of a big house; but I am out of doors a good deal. Algy has a splendid Canadian sleigh, and an immense assortment of bear skins and buffalo robes, and he takes me for long drives through the park and round the outskirts of the forest, and into the adjacent and outlying villages. Everything in Scotland is so new to me, that I am as pleased as a child at the sea-side when it is furnished with a spade and bucket, and is actually allowed to paddle in the water and play about on the sands.

Algy, too, allows me to drive, and tells me that I have light hands,

and shall make a capital whip. He is with me all day. Indeed, he hardly ever leaves my side for a moment. Nor is this devotion without its advantages, for it prevents any long *tête-à-tête* between myself and his mother. Old Mrs. Balfour still continues very gracious, but I can see that she is standing strictly on her guard, and is, for the present, only waiting her opportunity for a determined attack. In the interval, however, things are going very pleasantly. Several of the people near here have called, and it has been settled that, after a fortnight or three weeks, we are to have a ball.

I have for the present, at any rate, consented to remain here longer than we had originally arranged to do. I hate travelling in winter, and I am very happy here, and Algy is the most attentive and devoted of husbands.

I am just a little uneasy about Jack. After all, however, I can defy him or set Dromiroff on to him. Félicie, too, can be trusted to be faithful. She has too good a position for her to afford to risk it by any treachery. I have a good mind to send her down to London to make inquiries. She is naturally clever, and, if Jack be still in England, could easily ferret out his whereabouts, and ascertain what he is doing. It might then, perhaps, be worth while to keep my unholy bargain with him, and to pay him his hush money out of my Monte Carlo winnings. With a lump sum such as that, he would be almost certain to go to the devil in his own way. It would be not at all a bad settlement of matters, if he actually went back to the Riviera, tried to break the bank, lost everything in a night, and then, in a moment of despair, blew his brains out in the traditional and orthodox way. I, for one, should certainly not mourn over his loss. He has behaved vilely to me, from first to last.

Perhaps, also, if I find that Jack has not departed to Venezuela after all (although Dromiroff's former letters certainly led me to believe he had done so), but is stopping here in England, and meaning mischief,

it would be better to boldly take the old Russian into my complete confidence, and beg him to put a stop to Master Jack's annoyance for once and for all. It would be very great fun to invite the old gentleman —I sometimes really believe that he is *the* Old Gentleman *in propriâ personâ*—up here for a week or so. I am sure he would be charmed with all that he had to see, and it would be most funny to watch him paying compliments to old Mrs. Balfour, and practising on all her weak points. I have a great mind to suggest the idea to Algy, who knows very well who and what my friend Paul is. I don't see how Algy could object; for wherever Dromiroff goes, he stays at the Russian Embassy, and it is needless to add, is received everywhere with open arms, whatever may be the peculiar functions he has to discharge.

There is time enough, however, and, indeed, more than enough, to think of all these things. The visits from our neighbours are growing more numerous every day, and before long some of them must be returned. For a good many hours, too, I am out with Algy in the glorious Scotch air. Indoors, I have to give as much of my leisure as possible to my mother-in-law; and we all go to bed early, for the Scotch air and the warm room make you drowsy, so that the day, on the whole, is not at all too long.

Mrs. Balfour has apparently taken me into her confidence. I, on my part, am most careful to avoid all her prejudices. Of most of them I have been carefully forewarned, and the remainder I can guess by a sort of instinct. One day is so like another that I have hardly counted the march of time. Early one morning, however, comes an unpleasant surprise. It is in the shape of a long and apparently friendly letter from Lady Damer, and its evident object is to be invited to the Castle. This, I need hardly say, I have not the least intention of doing. I have, in an unconscious kind of way, been thinking things out for myself, and have arrived at some very definite conclusions—much as people who go to sleep thinking of anything very intently, and somewhat

in doubt and difficulty about it, often wake up in the morning to find everything clear and simple. This Scotch air, as I have said, makes you sleepy; but I am sure, also, that it quickens your brain.

In Balfour Castle I am my own mistress. I must really persuade Algy that I am tired of London, and that a few weeks in the season are all we want of it. For the rest of the year I shall be comfortable here, or shall make Algy take me about to places I have not yet seen. I shall then be able to keep objectionable people at arm's length. Anyhow, Lady Damer does not set foot in Balfour Castle, and that's flat. The letter, however, when I come to finish it, ends with what is obviously intended as a threat. "Oddly enough, my dear Lena," she writes, "I met the other day that very clever and accomplished man, Captain Fortinbras. He is a great traveller, and has either been to Venezuela, or else is going there; I am not quite sure which. He said that he knew Colonel Despard perfectly well, and, when I told him of your marriage to Mr. Balfour, seemed, for a moment, very much astonished. He will probably be in Scotland before long."

There are certain moments in one's life when one feels as if it would be a real comfort to kill somebody. At this moment I have a particular feeling towards Lady Damer. What harm have I ever done these women, that they cannot now let me alone? I have not robbed them of Algy. He never cared for any of the crew. He would as soon have chosen a wife from the chorus of the Eden Theatre. But yet, Lady Damer is clearly venomous.

I think I must put dear old Dromiroff on her track. I often wonder why that uncouth old *mouchard* should have been attracted to me. He must have seen through me at once. And yet he has never ceased to follow me about with letter after letter, evincing the most lively interest in my welfare.

With all these doubts and suspicions and fancies whirling in my brain, I start for my morning drive with Algy. A thaw has set in,

alternating through the night with sudden and sharp periods of frost. From the thatch of the cottages, and the gable ends, and the boughs of the trees hang great icicles, slowly gathering in bulk as the drops run down them and freeze upon them. Upon the hills the snow is still deep. In the valleys, however, and where the sun has fallen upon it, it has begun to waste away, and we can see great patches of green showing here and there. The emerald of the grass is the more brilliant, for the kindly snow has fallen upon it, and saved it from the worst of the frost, and kept it warm and comfortable.

The trees are dripping heavily, and underneath them are great pools of snow, half thawed and half frozen. The roads are difficult. Their surface has melted in the morning sun and frozen again at night and melted again and frozen again, until you could almost skate upon them. Algy has had nails—Alpine nails—put into the shoes of the two cobs, and so we spin along merrily in our drives, without a single stumble or mishap.

I drive—a task to which I am now thoroughly accustomed. Algy wraps himself up in buffalo robes and, I believe, enjoys himself. A man, I have noticed, likes to let a woman drive him or steer his yacht, or otherwise do something which he ought by rights to do himself. It pleases him, exactly as it pleases him to have children climb upon his knee, and pull his beard, and rifle his pockets, and poke their fingers into his eyes.

So we dash along the road until we reach the village, which is about four miles distant from Balfour Castle. There is an inn in this little old place which is much frequented by tourists in the summer; and in the coffee-room of the inn is an album, which, Algy says, always sets him thinking of Browning's "Inn Album."

"Hail blest acclivity, salubrious spot."

Some few days ago Algy rested the cobs here, and while we were

"You fool!" he said, "why did you not marry Miss Vyse? Ask your wife there how she and I planned the matter."

waiting we turned the stupid old album over. It had in it all the *bêtises* in which tourists indulge. This is one:

"Luna mellea.
O, carissima.
{ Henricus Smith.
{ Emmeline Smith."

A little lower down comes the pithy recommendation,

"Try their red-sealed port."

On the next page I had drawn a serpent with its tail in its mouth, —the old Talmudic emblem of eternity. Algy had written his name inside this weird circle, and I had written mine below it.

We did not this day stop at the inn, but we pulled up sharply at the post-office, which is exactly opposite the inn door.

Algy jumps out of the sleigh, and goes in to make some inquiries about overdue letters. I, remaining in charge of the cobs, turn my head to the inn and see standing at the door with his hands in his pockets, and a meerschaum pipe in his mouth, Jack Fortinbras!

He looks at me, and I look at him. The recognition is unmistakable. But he stares at me as if he had never seen me before, and wondered who I might be. The next minute he disappears through the swinging doors of the inn. The minute afterwards Algy comes out of the post-office with a perfect assortment of letters and parcels.

I tell him that I am cold and tired, and beg him to drive home; and I wrap myself in my furs and wonder, painfully, if any evil is to happen. The sun is disappearing fast. Where the hills dip are great pools of slush. The trees are dripping heavily. All along the river a thick, gray mist is rising and slowly climbing up the hillside. I shiver, and wrap my robes closer round me.

It is a comfort to dash up almost at a gallop under the Castle porch, and to find one's self in the great hall before an enormous fire of logs.

I retire to my room to prepare for dinner. But, before I feel sufficiently myself to appear, Félicie has actually to find me some cognac. It is the first time I have touched the stuff for weeks.

"Madame has been agitated?" she inquires.

I look at her, full in the eyes, but her face is inscrutable.

"Madame must not allow herself to be upset. If there is anything that troubles Madame, she must make light of it."

I say nothing, and she says nothing more. And so she finishes dressing me, and I make my way down to dinner.

At this minute, if I could kill Jack myself, or could pay anybody to do so, his life would not be worth the spin of a brass farthing.

I have sworn to forget the past, to be another woman, to lose my old self, and if Jack, for his own vile purposes, chooses to thwart me, his blood must be upon his own head. I certainly will give him no quarter. To-morrow morning, the first thing, I shall telegraph to Dromiroff.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Passion-Flowers and Poppies.

Finis coronat opus.

Balfour Castle, N.B.

AS soon as Félicie wakes up in the morning, I sit up in bed, scribble a telegram to Dromiroff, and address it to Claridge's Hotel—

"Fortinbras has come up here.
"Kindly order him back again.
"His very sight is hateful.
"You have power. Use it."

Then I take my chocolate and turn round to sleep. When I wake, I find the weather has changed. The snow has melted away, and the lawns round about the house and the paths in the gardens are perfectly clear. Algy, who has been the round of the home farm, comes back redolent of fresh air, and full of life and health. His mother, he tells me, is confined to her rooms with neuralgia. Sleighing is out of the question, and driving impossible. He is going to put on foul weather apparel, and ride down into the town, where he wants to look at some horses, which he is told will make a good four-in-hand team. He will be back before dark. Do I mind?

I must be forgiven for dwelling on this scene. Algy has just come in from the fresh open air. His cheeks are flushed. His hands are

warm. As he sits by me he throws one great, strong arm round my waist, and holds my chin with the other. He is more like a big schoolboy than a man of the world. The very idea of his strength and self-possession seems to paralyze me. I am not such a fool as to cry; but I should like to cry. I think if I could tell him everything —absolutely everything—at this very minute, that he would swing round and pull me closely to him, and swear with some tremendous oath that we should both of us forget everything, and begin life over again.

I have heard, until I am tired of it, that we have all our chances. This was my last chance in this world. And I missed it.

I told him to take care of himself, and said that I should take a little turn in the shrubberies, and should be careful to send inquiries as to his mother's neuralgia.

Then he left. Then I got up and dressed. Then I sat down and finished my diary up to date. It is now exactly noon. What a strange life I have led! If it were not for Jack, I should be absolutely happy, and without a risk or danger. It does seem hard, when everything is going so nicely, that this Frankenstein of mine should turn up again. I must trust in Dromiroff. It is of very little use to trust in Providence.

* * * * * *

7 P.M.

A little after twelve I went out for my walk in the shrubberies. A magnificent collie, a favourite companion of Algy's, accompanied me. As we reached a corner in the thick hedges of yew and laurel, and box and holly, the dog stopped. It bristled up its hair, and gave a low growl.

The next moment I heard a heavy tread on the gravel.

The dog strode out in front of me, with his ears drooped, his knees bent, and his nose almost on the ground, as dogs carry themselves when waiting for a spring. I quieted him with a wave of my hand. I turned the corner, and I came upon Fortinbras.

He was chewing a cigar which he had allowed to go out, and was scratching the ground with his stick. Now, for once and for all, I felt all my blood run boiling through my veins. This brute has been my ruin. He has in every way betrayed my trust. He has stolen my money; he has taken my jewels and pawned them. He has made me do things, the mere recollection of which is loathsome to me. And I know now, as I ought to have known long ago, that he cares no more for me than if I were a milliner's girl or a *bouquetière;* that he tosses my name about wherever he goes; and that it is his firm determination to live upon me henceforth, or else to ruin me.

"What are you doing here, Captain Fortinbras?" I ask. "You are not here by my invitation. Mr. Balfour would not allow you inside the gates. Will you go without any disturbance, or must I call for the men to turn you out?"

He turns on me with a very evil look.

"Lena," he says, "you have married this fool Balfour. You know our bargain. I have come for my money, and I mean to have it. You can give it to me now, or you can send it to me to-morrow. But have it I will. You have treated me badly, and I will now take not a penny less than ten thousand pounds. You can easily give me that out of your Monte Carlo winnings. If not, you can take the Balfour jewels up with you to town, that they may be reset, and you can give Félicie positive orders to have them stolen on the journey."

I simply stare at him.

"Jack," I say at last, "I defy you. I know all about you. Dromiroff has told me more than I would have believed. You have been the curse of my life. I hate the sight of you. Leave the place at once, or I will call the servants."

Jack Fortinbras steps towards me, and clutches my wrists in his hands.

"You are an incarnate liar," he hisses out, and he twists round my arms until I am sick with pain.

"Suppose I told that silly fool, your husband, all about how you were to capture him, and how I was to carry off Miss Vyse."

At this very second, the old collie crouches as if for a spring. There is a sharp crackle of the damp gravel. Algy slings round the corner, and in a second his two hands are clasped round Jack's throat, and he is shaking him as a terrier would a rat. As the fellow becomes black in the face, Algy hurls him away, and he falls sprawling, like some loathsome reptile, among a thick cluster of winter shrubs.

To think that I should ever have wasted an hour, or a thought, or a look on such a cur. To think that I should not have seen Balfour's good points sooner. He looks at this moment positively glorious. To think that I am not fit to be his wife—as I am not.

Algy turns to me with a look of inquiry. He sees that I am pale and trembling, and he throws his arm around my waist and gathers me to his side. Fortinbras picks himself up out of the damp mould, with very little dignity left in him. No detected welsher could wear a more sorry aspect; but he is full of venom, and he evidently means to play all his cards.

"You are younger than I am, Mr. Balfour," he says, "and you are stronger, but you shall answer for this, if you have the courage."

"I shall not fight you," answers Algy; "I know all about you. You have lived for years on *chantage*, and I am not surprised that you should be here to-day, attempting to terrify Mrs. Balfour. Leave the place, you hound, or I will kick you out myself."

Then came what I ought to have known would have happened sooner or later. We are always punished for our sins. Fortinbras was smothered in mud. The blood was dripping from his nose and mouth. Algy's grip had been terrible. His clothes were torn; his face was scratched by the shrubs into which he had been thrown, and he was absolutely livid with rage.

"You fool," he said, "why did you not marry Miss Vyse? Ask

your wife there how she and I planned the matter. Ask her how I was to marry Miss Vyse, and how dear old Lena was to marry you. Ask her who told Miss Vyse that you were a liar and a profligate, who had broken women's hearts, and had actually been engaged to Lena when you proposed to her. Ask her who dictated the letter Miss Vyse wrote to you. Ask her who put Fairfield on the job of writing to you. I hate you, Balfour; I would kill you now, if I could! But I want no revenge. You have lost a beautiful girl who loved you, as I know, and who would have made you a good wife. You are married to a woman whose name is notorious all over Europe, and who has been for many years my mistress!

"If you doubt this, write to my valet—Lena knows his address—and ask him to send you a bushel or so of her letters."

Fortinbras hereupon turns on his heel and strides away, with such dignity as he can muster. Algy takes his arm from round my waist, and stands in front of me, looking fiercely into my eyes.

"Is this true, Lena?"

"Is what true?" I ask, with my heart in my mouth.

"You see that scoundrel who is slinking away. You know what I told you of him in your own house. You know what I think of him. Is it true that you arranged with him that he was to marry Miss Vyse, and that you were to marry me? What brought him here to-day? Is it true that he came here to levy blackmail upon you as part of any compact so infamous? Why was he here at all?

"No man can go out with such a ruffian; but if what he has said is untrue, I shall tell my keepers to watch the grounds, and to treat him as they would a cur if he ventures to show his face here again. I will not myself touch the fellow. I only laid hold of him now, because I knew he was trying to frighten you, and because I saw that you really were frightened."

Here he stops and draws a deep breath, and turns to me.

"You were frightened, Lena. I know you were. We have been happy a short time; let us remain so. I am madly fond of you—you know it. Do not tell me that the whole thing is wrong. Do not let me believe that you have told me lies. Do not tell me that you have been in league with that fellow. Say that it is one of his own diabolical pieces of blackguardism. Tell me so, Lena, and I will follow him down into the village now, and his own mother shall not know him when I leave him."

I have been standing without any support on the gravel path. I am very frightened. Any woman would be. I totter, reel, and fall forwards. Algy catches me, and throws his great arm round my chest, almost lifting me off my feet.

"Let us go back to the house," he says. "You have been frightened, and you have caught a cold. It was foolish of you, dear, to come out on such a day. I know that you must have met many people in your life, and I believe Fortinbras to be scoundrel enough for anything. Go to bed, child, and I will see you to-morrow morning, when you feel better. I can put my hand on this blackmailer, and heavily enough, too, whenever I want to find him."

As he says this we are walking up the steps under the great porch, and a few paces bring us into the great hall—the glorious old hall with its roof and panelling and stained-glass windows, and trophies of battle and of the chase. How well I remember the moment when I first entered it.

They tell you that when you are dying, the whole of your life, with every incident and detail of it, comes back to you as if at an instantaneous glance. And clergymen say—in fact, I have heard them say so—that in that one moment you have time for repentance. It may be true. I wish I were dead. It is too late to repent now. I drop into a heavy chair of carved oak, and wait a few minutes in silence. Then I speak to him.

"Algy," I say, "I offered to tell you everything before we were married; you laughed, and you told me you knew it all. Upon my soul, I was dealing truly by you. I *would* have told you everything. I wanted to do so. You might have taken me or have left me. No woman will be to you such a wife as I shall. No woman can ever love you as I love you. I would follow you bare-footed through the world. I would take cruelty from you; anything, if you would only, now and again, throw me a kind look or a tender word. Let us forget all the horrible past. Let us live our lives out by ourselves. I will go where you like. I will do what you like. I will submit to your slightest wish." And here I burst out crying.

"I do not see, Lena," he answers, "that this has got anything to do with the matters of which you and that man must have been talking when I came up. Into the truth of what he was saying I must make it my duty to inquire. The matter is one which touches my honour.

"Had I been engaged to you when I asked Miss Vyse to marry me, I should have been as big a scoundrel as Fortinbras himself. That you told her so, and had money bargains with Fortinbras, was the lie I refuse to believe. I am sure that it is one of the vile fabrications of which that piece of scum is capable.

"I shall not dream of asking you to reply to my questions. I shall believe you to be absolutely innocent, although things look so odd. There are only two people in the world besides yourself who can possibly know the truth of this terrible story. One is Miss Vyse herself, the other is Frank Fairfield, who wrote to me at the time. I shall see them both.

"I have been sudden and rough with you to-day, Lena. It irritated me to see that rascal here. But I shall do you no injustice, my dear child, even in thought. Troubles of this kind are best faced out. You look tired, my wife. Go and rest."

* * * * * *

"You look tired, my wife. Go and rest." These are the last words that I shall ever hear from Algy.

I have won all that my ambition ever dreamed of. I am rich myself, and could defy the world if I chose to do so. I am married to the man upon whom I had set my heart. But I know him well enough to be sure that when he finds out the truth his love for me will turn to something worse than hatred. (Hatred I should not so much mind.) His love will turn to contempt and scorn.

What mixed motives I had when I schemed to catch him! I cared nothing about the man himself. I wanted the position I should hold as his wife. I hated the stupid girl with her doll's face, and Fortinbras had always tempted me, or the devil had tempted both of us. And I did what I did out of pure devilry.

Then, when the whole thing is over, when I have made a little fortune, and have really no need to think of marrying at all, I go and fall in love with Algy. I now love him so madly that to lose him would break my heart. And that I shall lose him is absolutely certain. There is no escape for me. There is not a single chance. The whole horizon is iron-bound. What is the good of attempting to undo the past? It is over and settled; if it is to be brought up against you, to cry for help is mere idleness. To help yourself in straits so terrible there is only one way.

I am sitting in a dreamy kind of way before the fire in my own room, thinking all this, or something like it. I would kill Jack, if I could get at him. He fought unfairly. He never gave me a chance. I wish Algy had killed him this afternoon. If this meeting had been on the terrace, instead of in the shrubberies, he would have thrown the brute over the parapet on to the paved yard below, and have settled him.

What harm have I ever done Jack? I have divided my purse with him. I have told lies for him. I have intrigued for him; and

now, when I am happy, when the rest of my life ought to have been bright, when I have a husband who loves me; when I might hope—as I know—to have children about me, this brute, out of pure malice and wickedness, ruins everything. He does not benefit himself a scrap. He only gratifies the vilest passion of his evil heart by wreaking his vengeance on me. They say that women are wicked. Was there ever a woman so utterly wicked as a wicked man of the worst sort? Never!

I am looking drearily into the fire, when Félicie enters. Whatever she may expect or think, she betrays nothing by her manner.

"Mr. Balfour, Madame," she says, "has ridden over to Craigie Towers, but wished me to tell Madame that he will soon be back." Félicie also hands in a telegram, and then departs noiselessly.

The telegram runs thus:—

"From Dromiroff, Claridge's, London,

"To Mrs. Balfour, Balfour Castle, N.B.

"The man will be arrested
"to-morrow morning. There is enough
"against him. He will never
"trouble you again. Expect me."

It is too late, but I shall bless dear old Dromiroff all the same. Nothing can alter things as they now are. The game is nearly played out. I have risked my last stake, and zero has turned up. It is very hard.

* * * * * *

This is the last time I shall write anything in my diary. Algy will read what I have written, and perhaps will not think so badly of me after all. He will know the exact truth.

He has had my undivided love. And the undivided love of a

woman—not of a school-girl—is a thing which very few men can get. When he reads this, he will know I am writing the truth, and I think he will be sorry.

There is a splendid fire upon the hearth. The logs are crackling, and the light is glinting upon the old wainscot. The wind is whistling round the corner of the castle, and I can hear the boughs of the trees groaning.

It is very hard, but it is very easy.

Here is my old friend—my chloral. I have only to multiply the usual dose. It is tasteless, and now that the thing is done, I have just time to write a few lines before I get into bed.

"My own darling,—

"I have deceived you once or twice in my life over little matters. I never really deceived you but once. After that I learned to love you, and I had hoped to hide everything up.

"I love you so passionately that I have died for you. I am happy to die, knowing that your last words to me were kind.

"I have not many hopes or beliefs. But you are a good man and a brave man. You deserve a good wife, and you are still young. It is odd for a woman of my age to have fancies, but I wish you would humour me. There is an old ring I one day put on your finger in jest. It was an unlucky ring—an opal. Put it back on my finger. Do so yourself, and, if you can, kiss me once.

"I have been absolutely faithful to you, and I am dying because I will not disgrace you or see your name disgraced.

"The whole of life is before you still. I have done nothing which cannot be undone.

"You may yet see, in this room where I now am, a wife whom you love and children clustered about her. She will not love you more dearly than I do. Doubtless she will be more worthy of you.

There are no secrets in this diary. If you read it, read it all, and you will know the worst of me. But you will see that I have loved you.

"Good-bye, my darling. I am glad that your last words were kind. LENA."

* * * * * *

I am feeling very drowsy, and it is time I went to bed.

THE END.

RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
LONDON & BUNGAY.

Stanford University Libraries
3 6105 018 410 238

STANFORD UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES
CECIL H. GREEN LIBRARY
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-6004
(415) 723-1493

All books may be recalled after 7 days

DATE DUE